

Reading the Bible Outside the Church: A Case Study

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Chester
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by David George Ford

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own work, and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis does not belong to me. I have written every word of it and my name is connected with it, but it is the product of a much wider collective. Therefore thanks are due.

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ABSTRACT

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Biblical studies and theology have been impacted by the “turn to the reader” in literary theory, and scholars are now more aware of the significance of the reader in the activity of Bible reading (Davies, 2013). However, most of the research exploring Bible readers has concentrated on active members of faith communities (Village, 2007; Rogers, 2009; Strhan, 2013) and University staff (Clines, 1995; Hull, 2001; Pyper, 2006). In Britain, those outside of the church and the academy are missing from this research, that is, the majority of the population.

This thesis considers how people who are not regular Bible readers might read five biblical texts. In particular I focus on men, as the cohort of British society least likely to read the Bible (Field, 2014). Ten months of fieldwork was undertaken at a Chemical Industrial Plant in North West England, where 20 men read through five biblical texts. Using annotation, questionnaires and interviews I examined how the texts were read. The data which emerged shows that the men’s relationships with the five biblical texts shaped their readings of those texts. By “relationship” I am principally referring to the associations evoked in a reader as they come to a text.

I argue for this relational reading practice in three ways. First, using Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading (1995 [1938]; 1994 [1978]; 2005) I suggest that these readers and texts are not unconnected entities but exist within the same dynamic system. A reader brings all that they are to a text, and the aspects of each reader considered most salient to the anticipated reading assume an influential role in the reading transaction. Second, under the headings: “experience,” “identity,” “attitude” and “belief,” I provide examples from my case study to illustrate this practice. These explore the various ways in which the men shaped their readings, indeed typically dominated them, as reading the texts reaffirmed their relationship with them. Third, however I also note a few occasions when the texts stimulated the reader into an atypical reading. This challenged the readers’ prior relationship with the texts and further demonstrates the relational nature of these readings, one involving both parties.

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INTRODUCTION: The Relational Nature of Reading

Sam was sitting at his desk surrounded by papers.¹ Aged 24 he is one of the younger engineers at the Chemical Industrial Plant and clearly enjoys his job. He is a Mechanical Engineer and the papers on his desk seem to be drawings for new pipe work. The Plant has been running for over 60 years and it requires constant redevelopment as the demands upon it change. It is located in North West England, an area with a long industrial heritage, and perhaps for this reason Sam is typical of the men who work here, most of whom are white, British and raised in the local area.

I had been visiting the Plant for six months and was introduced to Sam four weeks ago. I was a researcher with a rather unusual research project. I was exploring how men, who neither read the Bible nor went to church regularly, might read the Bible; and in this Chemical Plant I had found such men. These were men who typically had little interest in religion or the Bible, but were willing to help by giving up five of their lunchtimes to read through five different biblical texts, sharing their readings with me. Sam was one of these men for he did not own a Bible, and had never regularly read it or gone to church. He did identify as “Christian” in the 2011 Census of England and Wales, but that was because he was christened as a baby,² reflecting Abby Day’s idea of “natal nominalism.”³ In this project though, Sam described himself as “not at all religious,” but “slightly spiritual” because he hoped that “there’s something out there.”⁴

¹ Most of the 20 participants waved their right of anonymity and chose to be identified with their readings. However two used a pseudonym and three changed their name for this thesis so as to avoid confusion by the presence of multiple men with the same first name.

² Elizabeth Arweck (2013) has also noted this simultaneous combining of a Christian identity (linked to having been christened) with a non-practising, disbelieving or nonreligious one. In her case it was with 13-16 year old school pupils in the United Kingdom.

³ This is “an ascribed identity they believe was conferred upon them at birth, one that has not engaged them often in later life, until asked” (Day, 2011, p. 182).

⁴ The label “spiritual but not religious” is one which scholars are aware of (Leonard, 2001; Fuller, 2001; Marler & Hadaway, 2002; Tacey, 2004; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; King, 2009; Beaman & Beyer, 2013). For example, David Hay and Kate Hunt undertook focus group research amongst British adults who did not regularly go to church in order to explore their sense of spirituality (2000). Mirroring Sam’s self-description, Hay and Hunt point out that the commonest explanation given for having a sense of spiritual identity was “the conviction that there is ‘something there’” (2000, p. 18). In my case study three of the 20 participants directly identified as “spiritual but not religious:” Sam, Ethan and Zadok. However, on analysis of the data no distinctive qualities could be seen in these three men’s readings of the five biblical texts.

I was due to interview Sam, for over the past two weeks he had read through the different Bible passages I had given him, annotating them with his thoughts and completing a questionnaire on each. Today was an opportunity for Sam to talk about the Bible passages and add any concluding remarks. It was also my chance to raise some of my own questions about his reading of the texts, for something had caught my eye.

In the questionnaire which accompanied each text, the reader was asked if he thought the passage had a message, and if so what was it?⁵ When asked this for Proverbs 10:1-11, Sam wrote:⁶

“Basically work hard, be good, be godly and you will live well and prosper, or be ‘wicked’ lazy and bad and you will fail.”

For 2 Samuel 5:17-25 he wrote:

“The message is that David had God’s backing and therefore his regime was good anyone who opposed it was bad.”

For Matthew 18:21-35 he wrote:

“Forgive or be punished/‘tortured’ and don’t expect to be forgiven if you don’t.”

For Psalm 88 he wrote:

“Do as god says or you will suffer.”

And finally having read 2 John he simply wrote:

“Love god or you are evil.”

In three out of the five texts, Sam’s reply contained the formulaic answer: Do X or Y will happen. In the two texts where this did not occur (2 Samuel 5:17-25 and 2 John), Sam’s replies echo that formula. I brought Sam’s answers to his attention during our interview and this was his response.

Sam: Yeh they are all pretty similar aren’t they?

⁵ See Appendix F for a copy of this questionnaire.

⁶ In accordance with accepted practice (Winston, 2012, p. 125), throughout this thesis I will present quotes from the participants as they were written or spoken, so for instance at times God appears with a capital “G,” whilst at other times with a small “g.”

David: Yeh, both in terms of, kind of direction, but also in terms of the “do or something,” em, thoughts?

Sam: Em, I suppose that’s, that the view of the Bible I have over all is, be godly and do as God says or you, or you won’t prosper, bad things will happen to you. So I suppose, yeh, without thinking about it, that’s what I’ve put each time.

Sam’s reading of the five biblical texts was one significantly influenced by his “view of the Bible” for it was that view which shaped how the texts were read and was in turn reaffirmed by his reading of the texts. Sam understood the Bible to have a central message, “do as God says or you, or you won’t prosper” and a variation of this message was what he noted in every text, and so confirmed his view that the Bible had such a central message. Sam’s readings were not unique, for in different ways, but consistently throughout this project, I found that what these readers associated with the texts significantly shaped their reading of them. In other words, the type of relationship which the reader had with the texts informed the subsequent reading transactions. This phenomenon highlights the significance and influence of the reader in the act of reading, something that is known as reader-response criticism. In this thesis I draw upon one particular reader-response theory, the transactional theory of reading (Rosenblatt, 1995 [1938]; 1994 [1978]; 2005),⁷ to explore and explain the readings which Sam and the other men undertook.

Overview of Thesis

The catalyst for this study was a research question: How would a British person, who does not regularly read the Bible (or go to church), read the Bible? As a question it is one which builds upon reader-response criticism but also draws heavily from biblical studies and theology, where the role of real Bible readers has been considered. Much of this research however has focused upon those who are regular Bible readers (Village, 2007; Lawrence, 2009; Jennings, 2011; Francis, 2012; Rogers, 2013a; 2013b; Todd, 2013). Those who have been excluded from this research are those who rarely if ever read the Bible, and in Britain

⁷ In my in-text referencing, I only provide the date of the edition I am referring to unless it is important to highlight the original date of publication.

that is the majority of the population (Field, 2014; Theos, 2012). In particular, because men are the cohort of society least likely to read the Bible (Field, 2014), I focus on them.

For this reason, my use of the phrase “outside the Church” should be understood to refer to the cohort of British society who do not regularly read the Bible nor go to church. In using this phrase I am not principally concerned with the geographical location where the Bible is read, such as a restaurant (Bielo, 2009b, pp. 47-72), a pub (Lawrence, 2009, pp. 60-73), or in my case a Chemical Industrial Plant, although this will be considered in part. Neither am I exclusively referring to those who identify as “non-religious” (Lee, 2014) or as having de-converted (Wright, Giovanelli, Doan & Edwards, 2011), although the place of a reader’s religious identity will be reflected upon. My definition of “outside the Church” is concerned with actions, that is, an individual’s practice of neither going to church nor reading the Bible regularly.

My attempt to answer the research question took me to a Chemical Industrial Plant and to 20 men there who volunteered to read through five different biblical texts. They were invited to annotate the text, answer a short questionnaire on their reading of it and then discuss the text in a one-to-one semi-structured interview. My analysis of that data resulted in the central finding that my participants’ relationships with the five biblical texts shaped their readings of those texts. By relationship, I am referring to all that a person is in relation to a particular text, including their attitudes, beliefs, memories, expectations and identities. In other words, a person brings all that they are to the text and different aspects of the reader will shape the reading which takes place, some informing it more than others. This can be seen in Sam’s case, where his belief that the Bible had a particular message directly shaped his readings, whilst the influence of his natal Christian identity was less notable.

This thesis will argue for this central finding in three ways. First, I ground my finding in Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading. Using this theory I explain the mechanism behind these readings, for Rosenblatt contends that texts and their readers are not independent entities which come together in the act of reading and move on potentially unaffected, instead they are part of the same dynamic matrix, co-existing (2005, p. 40). Rosenblatt’s focus is upon the reader and text as they come together in the act of reading, but I highlight the pre-existing nature of this co-existence. In my case, the men existed within a matrix in which the Bible and Christianity could also be found, and the nature of their co-

existence became clear as they read the five texts, for it informed the sense of “meaning” which arose (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 11).

Rosenblatt further argues that a reader brings all that they are to a text. She writes:

If we think of the total literary transaction, we must recognize that the reader brings to or adds to the nonverbal or socio-physical setting his [sic] whole past experience of life and literature. His [sic] memories, his [sic] present preoccupations, his [sic] sense of values, his [sic] aspirations, enter into a relationship with the text. (1994, p. 81)

From all of these memories, preoccupations, sense of values and aspirations a reader decides which are of most relevance to the text. This is what William James called “selective attention” (1981 [1890]) and was something Rosenblatt incorporated into her theory of reading, for she argued:

It became possible to show that the text stirred up, brought into the stream (of consciousness), a complex welter of sensations, thoughts, and feelings. “Selective attention” brings some elements into the center of attention and pushes others into the background or ignores them. (2005, p. xxv)

Those elements that have been selected then play a greater role in shaping the subsequent reading which takes place.

Second, having grounded the central finding from my case study in the transactional theory of reading I then present four different ways in which my readers’ relationships with the texts shaped their readings of those texts. Using the headings: “experience,” “identity,” “attitude,” and “belief” I explore the influence of these factors upon the readings which took place. Moreover, in each of these cases the reader is seen to assume a dominant position when reading the texts, resulting in their relationship with the texts being reaffirmed by their reading, as is seen in Sam’s case.

The third part of my argument further evidences my central claim by demonstrating how a text is able to stimulate a reader into an unexpected reading, one which is shaped by, but does

not conform to, their prior relationship with the text. In other words, their experiences, beliefs or identity informed their reading but was not reaffirmed by it. In this way these readers were seen to have a relationship with these texts, one which shaped the readings and often reaffirmed the reader's pre-existing disposition, but not always.

To this end, the first half of the thesis charts the formation and refinement of my research question, along with the designing and implementing of the research. The second half then argues for my central finding by theorizing what took place and evidencing it through a series of examples. These examples not only demonstrate the veracity of my central claim but also nuance or challenge five different assumptions regarding Bible reading which can be seen in the academic or Christian world. These assumptions are:

1. That the geographical context of reading significantly informs the reading.
2. That there is a sceptical/accepting binary found in Bible reading and readers.
3. That the Bible is no longer viewed as a book of power in the West.
4. That the Bible is a book of power able to transform the reader.
5. That the text cannot stimulate a reader to a reading beyond their assumptions.

The second half of the thesis therefore also engages with these subthemes, each being addressed when the relevant data is engaged with.

The Readers and the Reading Site

Crucially though, it is the readings of 20 particular men which has enabled the production of this thesis. It is therefore appropriate to briefly mention each of them for they are at the heart of this project. Chapter 2 will consider in more depth my sampling approach and criteria, but for the present it is sufficient to note that all of these men were white, British and did not read the Bible, or go to church (or take part in a religious activity), on a regular basis.⁸

Andy K is a 26 year old welder, motorbike enthusiast and identified as “not at all religious” in this project.

⁸ Throughout this thesis I use “regular” to mean, monthly or more often, as is common practice in religious surveys (Brierley, 2006).

Andy G is a 49 year old mechanic. He is an active Freemason, and for this reason identified as “moderately religious.”

Anthony is a 59 year old manager and tennis player. He identified as a Christian and “moderately religious” although at the time he neither attended church nor read the Bible.

Bob is a 61 year old part-time manager who was also completing a computer science degree. He identified as “slightly religious” as he was neither overtly religious nor anti-religious.

Dave is a 44 year old welder and team leader for a group of welders. He identified as “not at all religious.”

Derek is a 62 year old welder, former rugby player and the oldest participant in this project. He identified as a non-practising catholic and so “moderately religious.”

Ethan is a 40 year old engineer who was working on a new distillation system for the Plant. He was shortly to remarry, and identified as “not at all religious.”

Gary is a 48 year old utility technician with an interest in psychology. He described himself as a “lover not a fighter” and identified as “not at all religious.”

John is a 22 year old manager who enjoys socialising with friends and was the youngest participant. He identified as “not at all religious.”

Matty is a 36 year old scaffolder, rugby league fan and was very family orientated. In this project he identified as “not at all religious.”

Mick is a 30 year old scaffolder who enjoys carp fishing. His wife was shortly due to give birth to their first child and he identified as “not at all religious.”

Paul is a 36 year old scaffolder who plays golf and at the time was trying to sell his house. He described himself as a non-practising catholic and identified as “moderately religious.”

Peter is a 56 year old electrician who had had a varied career which included coalmining. He identified as “not at all religious.”

Phil is a 48 year old electrician who a year ago stopped riding motorbikes in favour of playing golf. He identified as “slightly religious,” because he did not disbelieve in God.

Richie is a 46 year old mechanic and keen rugby league fan. He described himself as a lapsed catholic and identified as “slightly religious.”

Sam is the 24 year old engineer whom I introduced at the start of this chapter. He enjoys playing football, lives with his parents and identified as “not at all religious.”

Stewart is a 41 year old welder who found that work and family consumed most of his time. He was unwell for three weeks during the project and identified as “not at all religious.”

Tony is a 55 year old engineer and had worked at the Plant for 20 years. He described himself as a Catholic and attended church every five or six weeks; for that reason he identified as “moderately religious.”

Victor is a 31 year old scaffolder who had been a delivery driver for 13 years before that. He identified as “not at all religious.”

Zadok is a 59 year old utility technician who was heading towards retirement. He was very contented with life and identified as “not at all religious.”

These men’s readings of five biblical texts make up the substance of this thesis. However, I am the one who designed the project, asked for their assistance, analysed the data and wrote the thesis. I do not consider myself to be an objective outsider, rather I am a figure within this research project and although this will be considered later, for the present a brief descriptor should suffice:

David is a 37 year old PhD student who previously worked as a Physiotherapist. In this project he identified as “very religious.”⁹

I spent from October 2012 to July 2013 at the Chemical Industrial Plant where these 20 men worked. As a location it was one foreign to me, having its own dress code and culture. I had to wear a hardhat and safety glasses on most trips and was not allowed to visit the Plant unaccompanied until I had completed an induction process. There were some buildings which could only be entered with a security swipe card and others which were prefabricated portacabins without running water. However, the architecture of the Plant was its most striking feature; steel towers and miles of pipes which to an untrained eye looked like a maze of spaghetti. The Plant had opened in 1946 and I assume its location, close to a river and a now unused railway track, indicates that it was of some importance. Nowadays the site is principally owned by two global Chemical companies and its products are used in household goods such as fabric detergent. Over 200 men work at the Plant and are employed by one or other of the two main companies, or one of the smaller firms which is subcontracted there. All of my participants had their own base, be that an office or a staff room, which they shared with the rest of their team. Each of these small teams had their own sense of identity and atmosphere. Some groups were noisy and the room was filled with banter, whilst others were quieter. In some settings I was usually offered a cup of coffee but not in others. It was at lunchtimes, in these staff rooms that these participants individually read through and commented on the five Bible passages.

Overview of Chapters

What was produced in those lunchtimes now makes up this thesis. The chapters which follow have not been set out to conform to any one pre-established structure advocated by qualitative researchers. For example, Judith Bell (2005) suggests that having highlighted the aims of the study, a literature review follows, then a methodology chapter, a results chapter and an analysis and discussion chapter, before a conclusion. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat suggest a different approach, one informed by Practical Theology and Action Research

⁹ Popularly, some Christians do not identify as “religious” because they believe it implies they are trying to earn God’s favour by undertaking various sacred acts, such as reading the Bible or praying. Instead, they describe themselves as having a “relationship with God/Jesus,” because they consider any sacred acts to emerge from, and further develop, this relationship. For example see Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton’s (2010) book *More Jesus Less Religion: Moving from Rules to Relationship*. My self-identifying as “very religious” reflects the description I was given by my participants, that of being “a religious guy.”

(2006). They advocate the following: first, identifying a context requiring reflection; second, investigating it using qualitative methods; third, reflecting on the results of the investigation from a theological perspective; and fourth, creating a revised practice. This fourfold structure then shapes the subsequent written report. In my case, aware of the qualitative methodology which I assume and its emphasis on transparency, I have adopted a chronological and thematic approach to my chapters. This should not only result in a coherent thesis but also allows for the inductive nature of my project, and the open-endedness which that brings, to inform the thesis, something potentially lost in the adoption of a pre-established framework.

Chapter 1 primarily deals with the prompts and formation of my research question: how would a British person, who does not regularly read the Bible (or go to church), read the Bible? I begin by considering the “turn to the reader” in literary studies and how the role of the Bible reader has also been studied within biblical studies and theology. In doing so I highlight that most of the work undertaken so far has focused upon regular Bible readers and as a consequence the majority of the British population have been excluded from this enquiry. Three lesser known pieces of research are considered (Macdonald, 2007; 2009; Le Grys, 2010; Webster, 2015) which all involved some participants who could be labelled “outside the Church,” (in that they were not regular Bible readers or churchgoers). These studies explored how selected biblical texts were engaged with, but due to the particular objectives of each study none directly considered how the passages were being read, demonstrating the need for my own research.

Chapter 2 considers the methodological underpinnings which I build upon, arguing for a qualitative case study. It also addresses two issues which further refine my research enquiry. First, in light of my focus upon non-regular Bible readers and noting that men are less likely to read the Bible than women (Field, 2014; Christian Research, 2011), I decide to limit my selection to men. Second, it seemed unlikely that men who were not regular Bible readers would be willing to read the entire Bible, so I chose five biblical texts which I would ask them to read. This was the maximum number of texts I thought I could include without negatively affecting how many men would be willing to participate. In this way then a broad research question was refined to ask: How would a British man, who does not regularly read the Bible (or go to church), read five biblical texts?

Chapter 3 then documents how I went about answering this question. I begin by reflecting on my own identity and position within this research, for it would influence the readings the men would undertake. I then trace the decision to assume a mixed method approach utilizing three different research tools: annotation, questionnaire and interview. I recount the experience of undertaking the pilot study and how it informed the subsequent fieldwork. The chapter ends by describing the fieldwork and subsequent data analysis which took place. In this way the first half of my thesis provides a platform upon which my presentation and discussion of the findings is situated.

Chapter 4 is the first of five chapters which deal directly with the findings from my case study. I first present Rosenblatt's transactional theory and show how it theorizes the way in which a reader's relationship with a text shapes their reading of that text (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 30). Having done so, I then give a working example of this theory by exploring how a reader's prior experiences can mould their reading. Dave is presented as someone who directly linked his bitter reading of the texts to his upbringing. In order to consider his readings in more depth, insights from the fields of Bible reception and social psychology are brought into conversation with his readings. Gary's detached readings of the five biblical texts are then considered, for once again his prior religious experiences shaped them. Matthew Engelke's (2007) ethnography of a community of Christians who have rejected the Bible, the Masowe weChishanu Church, is compared with Gary's rejection of it. This chapter therefore contains the first strand of my argument that these readers' relationships with the five biblical texts shaped their readings of those texts by recounting how the transactional theory of reading explains this phenomenon. Moreover, it then provides the first of four examples which form the second strand of my argument. In particular, this chapter demonstrates how a reader's prior experiences can shape their reading of a text,

Chapter 5 explores two other aspects of a reader's relationship with a text. First it considers the role of the reader's religious identity in shaping their reading. This is done by presenting John, an atheist, and Anthony, a Christian, both of whose readings were not only informed by their sense of religious identity, but resulted in a strengthening of that identity. Once again I draw on insights from social psychology to examine these particular readings. Moreover, the impact upon these readings of the reader's religious identity, rather than their workplace

identity or setting, suggests that some social locations are more significant than others.¹⁰ This troubles an assumption within contextual Bible reading methods that the reader's geographical location shapes their reading (Riches, 2010), for the Chemical Industrial context was hardly ever linked to the readings which took place in it.

However, by noting the prominence of the reader's religious identity, it could be supposed that there are principally two types of readings, atheist or Christian, sceptical or accepting. Indeed a similar binary has been promoted by some scholars (Davies, 2004; Volf, 2010). The second half of the chapter addresses this assumption by demonstrating the influence of a reader's attitude towards the texts. Victor, a nonreligious man, is considered, for he was aware of the potential to read the texts sceptically, but chose to "be fair" resulting in sceptical and accepting readings. Paul is also presented. He is a moderately religious non-practising Catholic, whose doubting attitude resulted in him reading the texts sceptically, just as most of the nonreligious men had. In light of these findings, this chapter ends by showing that a spectrum, rather than a binary, of readings took place. Moreover, although there was a link between a reader's sense of religious identity and their reading, there were exceptions.

Chapter 6 considers the place of the readers' beliefs about the Bible, in their reading of the five biblical texts. First, I note that the texts were usually read for information, which the reader then critiqued and typically rejected. Once again I build upon the transactional theory of reading, for it contends that every reader is situated upon an efferent/aesthetic continuum as they read. To read efferently is to read for information, as one does a handbook. Whereas to read aesthetically is to read in such a way as to become absorbed in the world of the text, as one does a novel (Rosenblatt, 2005, pp. 10-12). I argue that my participants assumed an efferent standpoint towards the texts and so read them for information. According to Rosenblatt such a reading stance is appropriate for a selection of proverbs, but not for poetry, like Psalm 88 (2005, p. 11). Nonetheless no matter the genre, my participants typically engaged with the texts from an efferent standpoint. I suggest that there are three reasons for this: that the research materials encouraged the participants to assume this stance, that the reader's personality and gender meant they were predisposed to this stance, and that the men believed the Bible to be some sort of guide or manual and so read these texts efferently.

¹⁰ The term "social location" has come to describe the various influences upon a reader and their reading, these include: the reader's gender, class, nationality, personality, geographical location and employment (Segovia & Tolbert, 1995a; 1995b).

Ultimately I suggest that all three factors played a part, but the most significant was the reader's belief that the Bible is a guide.

Second, I explore a further reason why the texts were predominantly read sceptically and conclude that most of the men believed the texts would either try to convert them to religion or to live in a certain way. In other words, even though these men indicated that they did not believe the Bible to be the word of God or of any relevance to them, when it came to reading the texts, they did so demonstrating a belief in the transformative potential of these texts. This is seen in the act of "counter-reading," my term to describe a sceptical engagement with a text so as to disempower the assumed threat posed by its reading. In treating these five texts as texts of power, but a power they were able to disarm, these men trouble the views that the Bible is now a powerless book in the West, (Aichele, 2001; Macdonald, 2009) or that its agency-like qualities will transform a reader (Engelke, 2013).

Chapter 7 begins by recounting the ways in which these four different aspects of the readers' relationships with the texts shaped their readings of the texts. Having done so, I note that so far the reader has dominated the reading, for it was their experiences, identities, attitudes or beliefs which shaped the subsequent readings. However, there were a few occasions in which the text stimulated the reader to an unexpected or atypical reading. Three examples are given where a reader's experiences, preconceptions and beliefs inform a reading but did not result in a reading which conformed to them. In other words, the reader's relationship with the texts shaped their reading of it but did not result in the affirmation of some part of that prior relationship. This is the third strand of my argument. Such a finding is at home with the transactional theory and its understanding that the reader and the text are capable of shaping the reading. However it challenges literary theories which contend that the text has no influence upon the reading, like that proposed by Stanley Fish (1980), for in my case study the text provoked the reader to an unforeseen reading.

The concluding chapter retraces my central argument and the ways in which my case study problematizes five assumptions found within the academic and Christian world. I also highlight the uniqueness of this piece of work as one engaging a previously unexplored people group in this way, one which draws together the "guidebook" view of the Bible noted in biblical literacy and the efferent standpoint from literary theory, and one which has named and explored the phenomenon of "counter-reading." I then reflect upon four implications of

my work for the practice and study of Bible reading, before concluding by noting three main limitations of my work and the subsequent stimulus which they are for future research.

This thesis is therefore multi-layered in that it has one central argument and various secondary themes. This is typical of an inductive, inter-disciplinary, qualitative piece of research. In a different setting, these subthemes could be presented as independent arguments. What I hope I have achieved is the weaving together of a central theme with various subthemes into a coherent unit, without losing the particularity of each individual aspect. As a body of work however, it all begins with a research question.

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1: An Unheard Voice

This chapter explores the prompts which led to the formation of my research question. I argue that within Britain, study into how the Bible is read has typically concentrated on regular Bible readers, such as the clergy, laity or biblical scholars. Non regular Bible readers, those outside the church are missing from this field of inquiry, raising the question: How would a British person who does not regularly read the Bible (or go to church), read the Bible?

In order to situate present-day Bible reading research within a wider context, I begin by briefly noting the shift from the author to the reader in literary theory and the related emphasis seen in the philosophy and hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1979). This “turn to the reader” however is not just seen in literary and hermeneutical theory but also in biblical studies and theology. Accordingly I consider three subfields within these disciplines which demonstrate this new focus on the role of the Bible reader. What these subfields illustrate is that within Britain this research has typically concentrated on regular Bible readers. However, with national surveys indicating that most people in Britain do not regularly read the Bible, or go to church, I conclude that the majority of the population have been excluded from this research.

In bringing together the current focus in biblical studies on the role of the Bible reader and the lack of research into how the majority of the population may read the Bible, I provide the theoretical foundation for my study. The chapter concludes by highlighting three recent works which involved non-regular Bible readers. However these works do not directly address my research question, reaffirming the validity of my enquiry.

The “Turn to the Reader” in Literary Theory

Reader-response criticism is a term given to describe a collection of literary theories which are united in their emphasis on the role of the reader. The rise of reader-response criticism is usually accounted for by a two-step process. First literary scholars shifted their attention from the author of the text, to the text itself, and second they then turned their attention from the text to the reader of the text. This two-step recounting of recent literary history is a simplified one, ignoring other competing voices and alternative movements (Davies, 2013, pp. 11-35; Aichele *et al.* 1995). For instance, in *Validity in Interpretation*, the literary critic E.D. Hirsch

Jr. responded to the shift from author to text, by arguing for the centrality of the author and their intent (1967). However, for my purposes a brief overview of these two steps is sufficient to locate reader-response criticism within its wider context.

In the mid-20th Century scholars moved away from focusing on the author's motivation and purpose for writing, to concentrate on the text and its structure, this became known as new criticism. New critics, such as William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, argued that "the design and intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of art" (1970a [1946], p. 3). This rejection of the author was neatly condensed into the phrase "the intentional fallacy" which Wimsatt and Beardsley coined in 1946. This phrase was taken up by new critics as they argued against the idea that the reader was able to understand the mind or purpose of an author. In so doing, these scholars moved away from considering the author's intention behind the text, to focus instead on the text as an entity in itself. They argued for the autonomy of the text, describing it "as an object of specifically critical judgement" (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1970b [1946], p. 21). However, what new criticism also emphasized was that a text (such as a poem) and its results (its impact upon a reader) were in danger of being confused. Accordingly they also rejected "the affective fallacy" which valued the reader's response to a text, arguing that it would result in "impressionism and relativism" (1970b [1946], p. 21). Thus, "what readers brought to each text—including thoughts and feelings—was deemed extraneous to meaning-making" (Damico, Campano & Harste, 2009, p.179).

Nevertheless, the new critics' "affective fallacy" was found wanting, as is seen in the first essay in Jane Tompkins' anthology *Reader-Response Criticism* (1980). This essay, entitled "Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers" (Gibson, 1980 [1950]), is situated within new criticism because it principally concerns textual analysis. However it focuses on the role of the "mock reader" in this analysis, by which Walker Gibson is referring to the way a reader identifies with and responds to a text. Thus Tompkins describes it as,

The first step in a series that gradually breaks through the boundaries that separate the text from its producers and consumers and reconstitutes it as a web whose threads have no beginning and no end. (1980a, p. xi)

It was not long before scholars had turned their attention from the text to the reader, theorizing the role of the reader and the reader/text relationship in the reading process. The reader-response critic Norman Holland argues for such a focus:

Let us open up the text by assuming the person brings to it something extrinsic. It could be information from literary history, biography, or an archaic ritual like the flying between primitive bards [...] It seems to me not only possible but likely that whenever we read, we are associating such extratextual, extraliterary facts to the supposedly fixed text. Now rather than strip those associations away, what will happen if we accept these things outside the text and try to understand the combination of the text and personal association? (1980, pp. 363-364)

This shift in emphasis from the author, to the text and then to the reader is one well documented and perhaps most famously argued by Roland Barthes who wrote that “the birth of the reader must be requited by the death of the Author” (1989 [1968], p. 55). In writing this, Barthes is contending that meaning is not, and never has been, found in the authorial intent, but rather is located in the reader.

At present there is a wide variety of reader-response critics and associated theories which attempt to explain the reader’s role in reading. These include scholars such as Norman Holland (1973), Stanley Fish (1980), Wolfgang Iser (1974) and Louise Rosenblatt (1995 [1938]).¹¹ Having approached the subject from a variety of angles, these and other scholars have aired contrasting theories to explain the role of the reader in reading. In *The Postmodern Bible*, reader-response critics are divided into three camps (Aichele *et al.* 1995, p. 27). First there are those like Norman Holland (1973; 1980b; 2011 [1975]) and David Bleich (1978) who assume a psychological or subjective approach. Holland for instance, builds on Freudian developmental psychology and suggests that the reader’s identity theme (something akin to their personality or character) is the dominant influence on their reading of a text. Employing the acronym DEFT, he suggests that every reader responds defensively to a text and their identity theme shapes their expectations of that text. The reader projects their fantasies on to a text but these are transformed and so a coherent reading can take place, one “associated with this person’s particular identity theme” (1980b, p. 127). Accordingly each text can have

¹¹ Three edited collections which present a range of reader-response theories are: Tompkins 1980; Suleiman & Crosman, 1980; and Bennett 1995.

multiple meanings/readings but their scope is limited by the reader's identity theme and its response to the text.

Second, there are those who assume an interactive or phenomenological approach: Wolfgang Iser (1974; 1978; 1989); Wayne Booth (1983 [1961]); and Louise Rosenblatt (1995 [1938]) could be identified in this way. Iser for example, upholds both the objectivity of the text and the subjectivity of the reader by suggesting that there is a relationship between both parties. The reader is able to follow the flow of a text and fill in any textual "gaps" which exist from their own expectations or imagination, in this way reading becomes stimulating:

Whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our faculty for establishing connections-for filling in the gaps left by the text itself. (Iser, 1980, p. 55)

Therefore he too claims that there are multiple meanings/readings of a text but in his case he argues that they are constrained by the text.

Finally the third group, which includes Stanley Fish (1980)¹² and Jonathan Culler (1981), consists of social or structural approaches. Fish (1980) for instance, argues that the reader is nurtured to read in a certain way by their wider community. That community validates their reading by deciding if it is acceptable or not, and it also limits the reading, for a reader cannot read in a way they have not been taught. For Fish then, multiple meanings/readings of a text also exist, however it is the reader's "interpretive community, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings" (1980, p. 14) and also restrict them. The difference noted between these three groups of scholars demonstrates something of the diversity seen in reader-response criticism, and this subfield of literary studies is now an accepted part of western literary theory.

This "turn to the reader" should not be thought of as something solely emerging from new criticism and limited to literary theory, for there were other works which contributed to this

¹² Stanley Fish's earlier work (1967 [1997]) assumed that there was a reader/text relationship and that the text was able to lead the reader. His later work (1980) however argues that there is no such relationship, and it is this work which I engage with.

focus on the reader.¹³ The philosophical and hermeneutical theories of Hans-Georg Gadamer are examples of this (Fiorenza, 2011, p. 11; Osborne, 1993). In particular, his emphasis on the role of the reader's preconceptions in the reading process helped to theorize the subjective nature of reading vital to reader-response criticism. Gadamer acknowledges Martin Heidegger's influence (1979, pp. 236-273), for it was Heidegger who contended that all interpretation starts with an individual's "foreconceptions" (that is preconceptions) which are moulded by their life experience (2002 [1919/21], p. 77).¹⁴ Gadamer, in turn, draws attention to the word "prejudice" and its original meaning of "pre-judgements" to develop his own theory of interpretation:

What is necessary is a fundamental rehabilitation of the concept of prejudice and a recognition of the fact that there are legitimate prejudices, if we want to do justice to man's [sic] finite, historical mode of being. (1979, p. 246).

Having so framed the word, he points out that prejudices are vital for any reading, that is, for the creation of meaning, because the reader must have some prejudices or fore-meanings of what certain words placed in a certain order mean. The meaning which is generated is then constantly reviewed as the reading continues, with the reader engaging their prejudices.

This directly challenged the Enlightenment idea that preconceptions, or prejudices, were negative and a reader must strive to engage with a text in a prejudice-free way. For example, famously Heinrich Meyer in his 1829 *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* writes the following:

The area of dogmatics and philosophy is to remain off limits for a commentary. For to ascertain the meaning the author intended to convey by his words, impartially and historico-grammatically—that is the duty of the exegete. (Waters, 2004, p. 4; Porter & Clarke, 1997, p. 8; Silva, 1987, p. 22; Kümmel, 1973, p. 111)

¹³ Walter Brueggemann (2005) highlights the influence of the theologian Karl Barth. Barth moved away from the established historical-critical approach towards a post-liberal one, under which present day contextual Bible readings would fall. Kevin Vanhoozer (2010) traces this turn to the reader to Immanuel Kant and his "Copernican Revolution," whilst the authors of *The Postmodern Bible* link it to postmodernity (1995).

¹⁴ Heidegger and Gadamer are not alone in highlighting the role of the reader's preconceptions/prejudices, Rudolf Bultmann (1985) also asked *Is Exegesis without Presupposition Possible?*

Gadamer described the Enlightenment as having a “prejudice against prejudices” (1979, p. 242). He countered the assumption that the Bible reader (or exegete) is able to set aside their prejudices in order to handle the text impartially, by arguing that meaning could only emerge if the reader engaged with their prejudices.

Gadamer acknowledges that some prejudices are helpful in the construction of meaning, whilst others may lead to misunderstanding. Furthermore, he highlights two sources of influence upon a reader’s prejudices. The first is authority, such as a knowledgeable person whose advice they may follow, and the second is the tradition of which the reader is part (p. 262). Ultimately though, Gadamer understands that as the reader engages with a text the prejudices which make the reading possible have the potential to be challenged, for the text may cause the reader to reject or adjust certain prejudices. Therefore the reader is not trapped by their prejudices for the text has the potential to “assert its own truth” against the reader’s preconceptions and so change them (p. 238). Accordingly, prejudices are not a stable or fixed aspect of a reader but are constantly in flux (pp. 266-267). In these ways then within literary, philosophical and hermeneutical theory the attention of many scholars has turned to the reader. Unsurprisingly these developments have impacted biblical studies¹⁵ and Bible reading research.

The “Turn to the Reader” and the Bible

The impact of reader-response criticism upon biblical studies and theology is growing. Eryl Davies comments:

It has become something of a cliché to claim that developments in biblical studies lag behind those in secular literary criticism by some 20 or 30 years, but it is nevertheless a cliché that contains an element of truth. (2013, p. 22)

It is therefore no surprise that in recent years biblical scholars and theologians have started to draw upon insights from reader-response theory and apply them to Bible reading (McKnight, 1988; 1993; Clines, 1990; Darr, 1992; Fowler, 2001; Powell, 2001; Briggs, 2010). For example, in light of a postmodern context, Walter Brueggemann (1993) argues for a different

¹⁵ By using the phrase “biblical studies,” I am also referring to biblical interpretation and biblical hermeneutics. These sub-disciplines are principally concerned with the methods employed when reading the Bible and are associated with the larger discipline of biblical studies.

way of reading the Bible within the Church. He does not reject the historical critical tools associated with modernity, but his main emphasis is on the need to prioritise and engage the reader's, or hearer's, imagination. He describes a reader's imaginative engagement with a biblical text as:

that operation of receiving, processing, and ordering that transpires when my mind wonders in listening to a text, a reading, in praying, or in any other time. In that wondrous, liberated moment, I take the material and process it in ways that are useful to me, about which only I know. (1993, p. 62)

Accordingly, he argues that the contextual, local, and pluralistic nature of such readings be valued and respected (p. 9). Brueggemann is not advocating the wholesale adoption of any particular reader-response theory, rather he is indirectly drawing on different reader-response critics to advocate for the role of the reader's imagination when reading the Bible. Thus he echoes Fish's idea of an interpretive community (p. 62), Holland's use of Freudian psychology (pp. 59-63) and Iser's claim that the text has a degree of objectivity (p. 67). In elevating the reader and their subjective engagement with the Bible, Brueggemann is affirming core elements of reader-response theory.

There are two ways in which biblical scholars' engagement with reader-response criticism should be qualified however. First, contrasting the earlier threefold division of reader-response criticisms (Aichele *et al*, 1995, p. 27), some biblical scholars divide them into two groups, "moderate" and "radical" (Osborne, 1993).¹⁶ At the heart of this division is the degree to which each reader-response critic understands the text to play a role in the production of meaning. Subsequently, those theorists who argue that the text has a significant degree of influence on the reading are labelled "moderate," and those who suggest it has little or no influence are labelled "radical." For instance, Iser's reader-response theory is typically viewed as "moderate" for he affirms the objectivity of the text, understanding the text to guide the reader, correcting their tentative interpretation (1974; 1978). Fish (1980) though is presented as a "radical" reader-response theorist because he plays down the role of the text. He contends that all the reader can really claim to know is their interpretation of the text and

¹⁶ Other comparable labels are "soft" and "hard" (Barton, 2002) or "conservative" and "radical" (Vanhoozer, 2010; Petric, 2012).

this interpretation is itself constructed by the reader, who has been shaped by their interpretive community.

Second, as John Barton (2002, p. 147) points out, reader-response theory is still considered a “fairly hot topic” within biblical studies. Traditionally, and today, the focus of biblical scholars is principally on the author’s intent and the text, accessed through a historical-grammatical approach (Porter, 1990; Barton, 1998; Patte, 1998). This is evidenced by the majority of Bible commentaries assuming a grammatical and historical-critical approach to the text, with little emphasis on the reader. Accordingly, David Clines assessment is that “historical criticism is the most salient form of biblical scholarship today” (2009, p. 542).

For my purposes however, three specific subfields within biblical studies/theology will be reviewed to show the way in which the role of the Bible reader is being considered, and who the Bible readers under consideration are. First, there are those who have made use of social scientific tools to consider how real readers read the Bible. Second, scholars have considered biblical texts in light of their own social location. Third, some have described and promoted particular Bible reading methods which consciously consider the role of the reader. There are other subfields which can assume a reader centred approach, such as Bible reception, however the empirical and contextual nature of my case study corresponds to the three subfields noted above, thus I concentrate on them.

Social-Scientific Approaches

Anthropology, a subfield within social science, has been fruitful in considering how the Bible is read or engaged with by faith communities all over the world.¹⁷ James Bielo’s edited collection *The Social Life of Scriptures* (2009a) gives a flavour of the diversity of this work. However, although there are examples of such research globally, including those by Eva Keller in Madagascar (2005) and Matthew Engelke in Zimbabwe (2007), much of the research has been based in the USA (Ammerman, 1987; Wuthnow, 1994a; Davie, 1995; Crapanzano, 2000; Malley, 2004 and Ault, 2004). Bielo (2009b) himself built upon this body of research when he undertook 19 months studying different evangelical Bible study groups

¹⁷ The word “biblicism” has been used to describe the Bible, its role, function, symbolism and identity within a particular community or setting (Malley, 2004). However it is also used to describe a particular view of the Bible which emphasizes its unity, clarity, infallibility and centrality to the Christian life (Smith, 2011). To avoid confusion, I do not use the term.

in Michigan. Anna Strhan's (2013) ethnographic work in London with evangelical Anglican students is a British example of this anthropological enquiry into Bible engagement. What is common to all these works is that those being researched are either regular Bible readers or active members of faith communities.

Theologians are also using social scientific tools to consider how British people read the Bible, this includes: feminist (Llewellyn, 2015), practical (Francis, 2010; Todd, 2013) and contextual theologians (Morris, 2008). Once again though, those being studied are regular Bible readers. For example, ordinary theology is as a subfield of practical theology which seeks to chart the "theological beliefs and processes of believing that find expression in the God-talk of those believers who have received no scholarly theological education" (Astley, 2002, p. 1). Over the past ten years there has been a small but growing body of research which has assumed the label "ordinary theology," including "ordinary Christology" (Christie, 2012), "ordinary Pentecostal theology" (Cartledge, 2010), and is most recently seen in the edited collection: *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing* (Astley, 2013).

Under the umbrella of "ordinary theology" Andrew Village and Andrew Rogers have both considered how lay British Christians interpret the Bible, something they have labelled "ordinary hermeneutics" (Village, 2007; Rogers, 2007a, 2007b).¹⁸ Andrew Village assumed a quantitative approach, designing a questionnaire which over 400 Anglicans completed from 11 different churches. He focused on one text, Mark 9:14-29, and considered the participants' reading of it in light of various readerly issues, such as the influence of the participants' personality or church affiliation. Andrew Rogers undertook ethnographic research to consider the use of the Bible at two evangelical churches in England, one charismatic and the other conservative (2013a; 2013b; 2009). Assuming a multi-method approach, Rogers spent over six months at each church acting as a participant observer at services and Bible study groups, along with undertaking a questionnaire and interviewing church attendees. Where Village's research shed light on preselected areas which he chose to investigate, Rogers' qualitative approach provided more flexibility, allowing the data to shape the lines of enquiry. For instance, he became aware of particular hermeneutical lenses which were being used, such as a Jesus hermeneutic, which he then considered further (2007b).

¹⁸ Over time Rogers appears to have distanced himself from the phrase "ordinary hermeneutics" preferring the label "congregational hermeneutics," (2013a & 2013b.)

Once again though, those being studied are regular Bible readers. Positively, this empirical approach employed by theologians and ethnographers is one which I will draw upon, for although my anticipated participants will be different, many of the methods which these scholars have used are valid for my work. This is the first of the three examples demonstrating the influence of reader-response criticism within Bible reading research and the narrowness of the sample being studied.

Social Locations and Bible Reading

Recently there has also been global interest in reading the Bible with the reader actively allowing their context to inform that reading. The exact nature of the readerly standpoint which is said to shape the reading often varies, but examples include: feminist (Brenner & Fontaine, 1997); third world (Sugirtharajah, 1991); African, Asian or Latin American (Levison & Pope-Levison, 1999); disabled (Avalos *et al.* 2007); postcolonial (Sugirtharajah, 2012); liberationist (Gottwald & Horsley 1993); queer (Guest, *et al.* 2006); postmodern (Castelli *et al.* 1995); Rabbi (Magonet, 1991); sinner (Rowland & Roberts, 2008); exile (Brueggemann, 1993); and various alternatives (such as an Oceania standpoint (Havea, Neville & Wainwright, 2014)), or combinations of the above (like a postcolonial feminist standpoint (Dube, 2000)). To a greater or lesser degree, reflexivity is a part of all these approaches. In other words, the author(s) has considered an individual passage, or the entire Bible, in light of a particular ideology, social location or life experience. Indeed these three factors often inter-twine in the Bible reading which they present. Nevertheless, as I will shortly demonstrate some tend to assume a form of ideological criticism, others consider themselves to be doing contextual Bible readings, whilst still others identify with autobiographical criticism.

The studies above have generally been undertaken by academics who have been underrepresented in the field of biblical studies. Unfortunately the reflexivity which they employ is often missing from the white western males who have historically dominated this field, for they too have a social location which will have influenced their own engagement with the biblical texts. As Brueggemann points out, “what was taken to be ‘objective’ was in fact the aggressive practice of privileged interpretations, mostly white, mostly male, mostly adherent to Enlightenment rationality” (2005, p. 155).

Even though many of the white males who have dominated biblical studies have come from Britain, there are those who have engaged with the Bible reflexively in light of their ideological standpoint, social location or life experience. David Clines argues for the place of ideological biblical criticism in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (1995), and David Horrell (2010) is a specific example of this in his ecological reading of the Bible.¹⁹ In other words, ecology is the ideology through which various biblical texts are engaged.²⁰ Horrell is aware that the Bible is somewhat ambivalent towards environmental issues, but argues that it should be read in light of contemporary science, for such a reading would challenge a traditional Christian anthropocentric view of the world, and so:

Reading the Bible afresh in light of the environmental issues that face us involves reconfiguring the landscape, recasting the story, seeing the whole thing differently, and at the same time seeing ourselves and our world differently too. (2010, p. 128)

Horrell's ideological criticism is a recuperative one where the Bible continues to play a positive role in his thinking. He notes though that this need not always be the case for in some instances it is rejected as being incompatible with the ideological stance of the reader, such as was the case for Daphne Hampson (1996).

There are also British contextual readings of the Bible where the author has consciously chosen to consider the text in light of their social location. The results of this are readings which are informed by and inform their context. For example, in Lloyd Pietersen's *Reading the Bible After Christendom* (2011) he reflects on how the Bible could be read in a British post-Christendom context. John Hull's book *In the Beginning There was Darkness* (2001) is another example of this. He is a British scholar who reads the Bible acutely aware of his blindness and its impact upon that reading. He describes the content of his monograph in this way:

¹⁹ Ideological criticism also explores the ideology promoted by the text itself or emanating from the historical interpretation of the text, typically, by the church (Davies, 2013, pp. 61-80). See West (2004) for a wider discussion on whether texts do or do not have ideologies.

²⁰ See also Horrell, Hunt & Southgate (2010) and Horrell, Hunt, Southgate & Stavrakopoulou (2010).

In these chapters I will enter into conversation with the Bible from my point of view as a blind person. I describe these as conversations because I am conscious of the fact that what the Bible says to me has changed since I lost my sight. This is not only true of the places where there is specific reference to blindness, but of the text as a whole: when I realized that the Bible was written by sighted people, I felt alienated from it. (2001, p. 3)

This book not only contains reflections derived from the Bible which Hull comments on as a blind man, it also discusses wider philosophical and practical issues regarding blindness, the biblical text and the author's experiences. For example, reflecting on the actions of two anonymous blind men going to Jesus for healing (Matthew 9:27-31), Hull recounts the only occasion when he sought "faith healing" and the lasting impression which it left upon him (2001, pp. 34-39).

Hull's example overlaps with autobiographical biblical criticism, which is a way of reflecting on the Bible whereby the scholar engages with a text consciously aware of their own sense of identity and life experience. There are a number of international edited collections, including Anderson & Staley (1995), Kitsberger (1999; 2002), and Black (2006), but I am unaware of many British examples of this approach to Bible reading. Stephen Moore's (1999) essay "Revolting Revelations" is one, as is Hugh Pyper's "The Bible as a Children's Book" (2006). Pyper recalls growing up in a Presbyterian Church in Edinburgh in the 1960s and the impact which singing metrical Psalms had upon him as a child, and still does. His essay reflects on this and another childhood experience, reading Carol Kendall's *The Gammage Cup* (1959). He notes that these experiences are ones which "I think, affected, or at least confirmed, my attitude to texts and still have repercussions in my approach to biblical reading" (2006, p. 143). For instance he recalls some of the colourful, evocative and mysterious language used in the Psalms, commenting on Psalm 24 that:

The tune was stirring, but the words have stuck because even then I felt their fascination. The personification of the doors singing and lifting up their heads was a curious excitement, as does the implied power of apostrophe in that weird word "Ye." (p. 144)

Other poetry such as Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*, had a similar effect. In the case of the Psalms, this was language (or poetry) which some scholars regarded as childish or simple. In Pyper's experience however, it was a "gateway to a sense of language as a field of fantasy and imaginative construction" (p. 150). Accordingly he argues that "there is a childlike wonder in the possibilities of language that open up and [sic] deeper sense that there may be truths that are too much for language at its most eloquent" (p. 150).

These then are some of the examples, where professional Bible readers, such as a biblical scholar, or members of faith communities, have engaged with the Bible consciously aware of their role as the reader. This may involve engaging with the text through a particular ideological lens, with reference to a particular context, or in light of their past experiences. What is common to them all is that the reader understands themselves as informing the reading and those missing from this inquiry are non-regular Bible readers.

Bible Reading Methods

My final example of the way in which the "turn to the reader" has influenced biblical studies and theology, is in the promotion of certain Bible reading methods which have gained a following globally. These methods are Scriptural Reasoning and the Contextual Bible Study method (CBS).²¹ The practice of scriptural reasoning involves Christians, Jews and Muslims reading and discussing their scriptures together, usually focusing on a particular topic or individual (Higton & Muers, 2012). This method emerged in mid 1990s North America, with Peter Ochs coining the term "scriptural reasoning" (Higton, 2009). In Britain it has been championed by David Ford (2006), and the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme. CBS on the other hand traces its roots back to 1950s and 60s Latin America and Liberation Theology. It parallels my own work most and so is the final example.

CBS is an approach to group Bible reading that was formulated and championed by the South African Gerald West (1993; 1999; 2007), who in turn was significantly influenced by the base community movement which sprung up in Latin American in the 1950s and 60s. An evangelisation and education drive by the Roman Catholic Church, along with a shortage of priests within Latin America (and in particular Brazil) led to the training up of lay readers who would lead small community Bible studies, known as "Base communities" (Muskus,

²¹ There are other less known reader-centred Bible reading methods, such as that promoted by Walter Wink (2010 [1973]), or the story/experience based model used by Unlock, a Christian charity (Richardson, 2001).

2002, pp. 12-13; Dawson, 1999).²² In this way lay people were given the tools, opportunity and authority to read the biblical text for themselves. These small groups followed a ‘see, judge, act’ approach, whereby their own context (see) was brought to the biblical text and considered (judge), with a practical result anticipated (act) (Brown, 1990, p. 118). These stages have remained central to the CBS method which emerged from it (West, 2011). So significant was this movement that in 1968 the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) in Medellín acknowledged and affirmed it.²³

Gerald West adapted this approach and gave it the name Contextual Bible Study method. He described it as having four aspects (1993, p. 12):

1. A commitment to read the Bible from a poor and oppressed perspective
2. A commitment to read the Bible in community
3. A commitment to read the Bible critically
4. A commitment to read the Bible for individual and social transformation.

In practice, CBS is a setting whereby a group of people can openly discuss a biblical text and its outworking for their community and lives. In an attempt to provide space for those on the margins to speak, the Bible reading and discussion is facilitated rather than led and everyone’s contribution is noted down. Unsurprisingly those who typically participate are Christians or on the margins of Christianity and have something in common, such as geographical location (Lawrence, 2009). CBS does incorporate aspects of historical and grammatical criticism, but also considers the reader and their context, understanding that each reading community will engage with the biblical texts in a unique way (Riches, 2010, pp. 37-45).²⁴

CBS has gained prominence within the British church and amongst academics that have an interest in real readers and the Bible (Riches, 2010; Lawrence, 2009). Much like the Bible readers studied by anthropologists, CBS readers are also active members of faith

²² Such a gathering would become known as a *Comunidade Eclesial de Base*, Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC) or Base community.

²³ For a Spanish version of the final report from that council, see: Documentos finales de Medellín (1968), in particular chapter XV, sections 10-12.

²⁴ There are similarities between CBS and ordinary theology, for both are principally concerned with the views and insights of non-professional Christians, (that is, not clergy or academics), and Astley’s phrase “ordinary theology” echoes Gerald West’s “ordinary readers” (West, 1993; 1999).

communities (Riches, 2005; Riches, Miller & Wenell, 2006; Ball & Jones, 2006; Jones, Ball, Howsion & Hulstrom, 2006; Jones, Ball & Maitland, 2007). However, it has also been used with those on the margins of the church and society. For example, Alison Peden (2005) recounts its use in Cornton Vale Women's prison, Stirling. As a prison chaplain she led a weekly CBS session, adapting the method for that setting. She reflects:

CBS provided a wonderful way for women to make some sense of imprisonment and to give language to their experience. They often recognized their lives in the Bible and so felt validated in their identities. (2005, p. 18)

Susannah Cornwall and David Nixon (2011) have also used CBS with a group of homeless people,²⁵ and John Riches (2010, pp. 13-15) writes of its use amongst male prisoners and ex-offenders in Scotland.²⁶ Once again though, those taking part have some connection to Christianity. In Peden's case the participants were prisoners linked to the chaplaincy, for Cornwall and Nixon they were clients at a Christian run soup kitchen. So although these Bible readers could be identified as being outside the Church, they did have a personal and practical link with Christianity.

Summary

This short survey demonstrates that "the turn to the reader" has not just occurred in literary theory, but has influenced the shape and content of present day biblical studies and theology. Practical theologians are using tools from social science to consider how "ordinary" Christians are reading the Bible and biblical scholars are becoming more aware of their social location and its influence on their reading of the Bible. Moreover, some of them have then invested in Bible reading methods which allow lay Christians to do the same. Furthermore, as I have consistently demonstrated, those missing from this research are those who are not regularly exposed to the Bible, either in an academic or religious setting. In light of the decline of Christianity in Britain (Bruce, 2003) most of the population make up this cohort.²⁷

²⁵ See also Nixon, (2011).

²⁶ Others have facilitated similar Bible reading approaches with those at the margins of society. For example, Andrew Curtis (2000) and Avaron Ipsen (2009) have considered how sex workers read certain Bible passages.

²⁷ What follows considers the adult population. There has been significant research into children and young people's engagement with the Bible, for examples see Freathy (2006) and Francis (1996).

An Unheard Voice

In 2012 Theos, a Christian think-tank, published *Post-Religious Britain? The Faith of the Faithless*. This report drew on three different surveys which had been taken over the last four years to gain a better understanding of non-religiosity in Britain.²⁸ It concluded that 81% of those sampled were not regular Bible readers.²⁹ A 2010 survey of England and Wales conducted by Christian Research concluded that 87% of those polled were not regular Bible readers.³⁰ In 2008 CODEC undertook an earlier survey of the public's Bible reading habits and knowledge, and concluded that 74% of those interviewed were not regular Bible readers.³¹ These results must be handled cautiously, for different surveys word questions differently and the public often respond by giving more socially acceptable answers (Oppenheim, 1992, pp. 138-140; Field, 2014). Furthermore, all these figures do not refer solely to people's personal Bible reading habits, some include reading the Bible in a Church service, wedding, or other setting. However it consistently suggests that the majority of the British population are not regular Bible readers. Clive Field recently reviewed over 123 national and 35 local surveys undertaken since the Second World War concerning the Bible and the British public. He concluded that: "Readership in the Bible has declined, with only around one in ten reading it at least weekly and three-quarters less than once a year or never" (2014, p. 517).³² These findings suggest that the bulk of the British population have been excluded from Bible reading research.

In light of this decline in Bible readership, some may be tempted to conclude that biblical literacy in Britain is also diminishing. Certainly research shows a similar decrease in Bible ownership, knowledge and belief (Field, 2014). However, the term "biblical literacy" and its

²⁸ "Non-religion" is an emerging phenomenon. In Britain this is principally due to the significant increase in people identifying in this way, 25% of the population of England and Wales identified as having "no religion" in the 2011 Census, a 10% increase from 2001 (Office of National Statistics, 2012). For a brief overview see Brown & Lynch (2012). Other research in this area includes: Sheard (2014); Voas & McAndrew (2012); Bullivant & Lee (2012) and Lee (2012). See also the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (nsrn.net) and its recently established *Secularism and Nonreligion* journal.

²⁹ The exact figures were as follows: 61% never read the Bible, 10% read it once a year, 10% read it several times a year, 4% read it once a month, 3% read it several times a month, 3% read it once a week, 3% read it several times a week, 5% read it once a day and 1% read it several times a day (Theos, 2012, pp. 20-21).

³⁰ The exact figures were as follows: 67% never read the Bible, 10% hardly ever read it, 3% read it once a year, 7% read it a few times a year, 2% read it once a month, 1% read it once a fortnight, 4% read it once a week and 5% read it daily/almost daily (Christian Research, 2011, p. 44).

³¹ The exact figures were as follows: 13.3% never read/use the Bible, 21.4% can't remember reading it, 26.5% read it more than a year ago, 12.8% read it in the last year, 8.6% read it in the last month and 17.1% read it in the last week. This information was provided by Pete Phillips, Director of Research at CODEC (personal communication, October 30, 2012). No official or comprehensive report has ever been published, but for an overview of CODEC's biblical literacy project and initial findings see Phillips (2011).

³² Field's paper (2014) details other areas related to the Bible and the British public, such as changes in Bible ownership, the public's knowledge of the Bible's content, belief in the Bible, and the Bible's influence.

assumed downturn are contested (Avalos, 2010; Hine *et al.* 2011; Rodriguez, 2014; Crossley, 2015). For instance, the decline in Bible readership which I have noted lends itself to the claim that the Bible is now less of an influence upon British people and culture than it once was. However, a recent edited collection *Rethinking Biblical Literacy* (Edwards, 2015) in part argues that biblical images and tropes continue to be found throughout British (and global) culture, something Yvonne Sherwood refers to as the “afterlives” of the Bible (2000). Accordingly, one of the contributors to this volume, Matthew Collins, writes:

rumours of the Bible’s ‘loss’ to modern society are greatly exaggerated. It may no longer play such an explicitly prominent role in daily life, yet nevertheless continues to saturate our culture and heritage. (2015, p. 90)

Two points are worth noting in this discussion. First, some of the evidence used to argue for or against a decline in biblical literacy is not longitudinal in nature, but rather provided a snapshot of one or more aspects of biblical literacy at a particular point in time. For example, Philip Davies (2009) argues for a decline in biblical literacy quoting figures from the CODEC survey I noted earlier, even though that survey only refers to one-off data gathered in 2008. This is not always the case, since a few works have incorporated a longitudinal component, see Crossley (2014), or purposefully gathered data from different age groups in society, such as the Bible Society’s 2014 *Pass it On* campaign.³³ Second, some suggest that their research addresses the issue of biblical literacy, but in truth it is only dealing with one aspect of biblical literacy, such as Bible ownership, as Davies (2009) does, or cultural manifestations of biblical images and tropes, as is seen with Christopher Meredith (2015).

There is still no consensus regarding what should or should not be understood as biblical literacy (Edwards, 2015). The broadest definition I am aware of is given by Pete Phillips, and encompasses seven areas.³⁴ They are an ability to read the Bible, knowledge of its content, awareness of its significance, ability to apply it, recognition of biblical allusions in a culture, an ability to embed biblical knowledge back into a culture, and playful use of biblical tropes and images. There has also not been a longitudinal study which has addressed the topic of British biblical literacy in all its breadth, demonstrating the need for further research on these

³³ This research principally concerned parents and children, and was designed to encourage the reading of Bible stories to children.

³⁴ This was in personal communication, June 10, 2015.

issues. However for my purposes, in light of the ongoing nature of this discussion, I will refrain from using the term “biblical literacy” and use “Bible reading” as it suitably describes the phenomenon which I am concentrating upon. This should be understood as falling under the umbrella of biblical literacy, but is not biblical literacy in its entirety.

The figures I presented earlier on Bible reading are part of a wider trajectory where Church attendance and other Christian activities and identities are also seen to be in decline. Therefore not only do the majority of the population not read the Bible regularly but they also do not attend church on a regular basis either. The 2012 Theos report concluded that 73% of those polled do not attend a religious service regularly.³⁵ The 2010 Christian Research survey found that 85% of those sampled did not attend church regularly.³⁶ The CODEC survey indicated that over 75% of people did not regularly attend a place of worship.³⁷ The figure which Peter Brierley (2006) arrived at following the Church Census in 2005 was that 92.7% of the English population did not attend church on a regular basis.³⁸ Reflecting on the decades of decline in Church attendance along with the corresponding decline of other Christian rituals like baptism and activities such as Sunday school attendance, Callum Brown (2009) entitled his book *The Death of Christian Britain*.³⁹ Echoing this, Lloyd Pietersen (2011) describes present day Britain as a society where “it can no longer be assumed that ordinary people know the contents of the Bible or even the basic outline of the Christian story” (2011, pp. 5-6). Field suggests the declining influence of the Bible in the lives of British people is “a manifestation of a wider process of secularization” (2014, p. 520).⁴⁰

It seems that the bulk of the British population, perhaps around 75%-93%, do not regularly attend church and, similarly, 74%-87% do not regularly read the Bible. Unsurprisingly, it is those who do not regularly attend church, or do not identify with a particular religion that

³⁵ The exact figures were as follows: 45% never attend a religious service, 13% attend yearly, 15% attend several times a year, 6% attend monthly, 4% attend several times a month, 10% attend weekly, 4% attend several times a week, 3% attend daily (Theos, 2012, p. 19).

³⁶ The exact figures were as follows: 69% never/hardly ever attend church, 5% attend yearly, 11% attend a few times a year, 2% attend monthly, 3% attend fortnightly, 10% attend weekly, 1% attend daily (Christian Research, 2011, p. 25).

³⁷ The exact figures were as follows: 48% never attend a place of worship, 25% attend once to six times a year, 3% attend seven to twelve times a year, 3% attend thirteen to twenty five times a year, and 19% attend twenty six times a year or more.

³⁸ The exact figures were as follows: 85.5% never attend church, 4.6% attend yearly, 1.9% attend twice a year, 0.7% attend quarterly, 0.4% attend monthly, 1.7% attend fortnightly, and 5.2% attend weekly (Brierley, 2006, p. 151).

³⁹ For a good summary of this subject and associated data see Bruce, (2003).

⁴⁰ For a recent overview of religious change in Britain, with particular reference to the process of secularization, see Davie (2015, pp. 186-196).

read the Bible least (Field, 2014). Christian Research notes this overlap (2011, p. 15), as does Theos (2012, pp. 20-21) who found that 96% of those who self-designated as not belonging to a religion did not read the Bible regularly.⁴¹ One conclusion from this data is that most of the British adult population have been excluded from academic research on the role of the reader in Bible reading, they are an unheard voice, for the focus of scholars has been on professional Bible readers or those within or on the fringes of Christianity.

Comparable Research

In light of the near singular focus upon regular Bible readers, demonstrated in this chapter, a research question emerged: How would people, who are not regular Bible readers, in other words the majority of the British population, read the Bible if given the opportunity? As I have just shown, there are various surveys into the British public's use of, views on, beliefs about or attitudes towards the Bible.⁴² Smaller qualitative pieces of work have also been undertaken. Nick Spencer (2005) undertook research with 60 people who did not regularly attend church. These participants were interviewed in a one-to-one setting where they discussed various aspects of life and faith, including their views on the Bible. F. Morgan (2008) undertook a case study which explored the opinions and biblical awareness of young adults who do not attend church. Most recently Dawn Llewellyn (2015, pp. 65-87) interviewed post-Christian women and found that some still selectively read the Bible as an aid for their spiritual development. Significantly though, none of these works actually involved people reading a biblical text. Although different methods have been used and a variety of approaches can be seen, there still remains a lack of research into how most British people would actually read the Bible.

I am aware of three lesser known pieces of research which involved non-regular Bible readers reading different sections of the Bible. As I will show, all three had different aims and none principally sought to consider how the Bible is read by someone who does not read it regularly. In Edinburgh, Fergus Macdonald (2007) undertook a qualitative project, which in part considered "how far can meditative engagement with specific psalm texts facilitate the spiritual quest of young adults for personal meaning and spiritual enlightenment?" (2007, p. 2). Thirteen university students volunteered to take part, all of whom had a deep interest in

⁴¹ The exact figures were as follows: 82% never read the Bible, 7% read it once a year, 6% read it several times a year, 1% read it once a month, 2% read it several times a month and 1% read it several times a week, (Theos, 2012, pp. 20-21).

⁴² Other surveys include Gill *et al.* (1998) and the Catholic Biblical Federation (2008).

spirituality and varying degrees of religious affiliation and practice (Macdonald, 2009, p. 197). They were all under the age of 30, and only three were British. Although Macdonald does not explicitly state it, three of the participants may have been regular Bible readers as they attended church on a regular basis. The others, it is assumed, were not regular Bible readers.⁴³ The participants took part in six *Lectio Divina* meditations each based on a different Psalm.⁴⁴ The students committed themselves to spending at least ten minutes a day meditating on the respective Psalm and journaling their interaction with it for a week. At the end of the week, members of the group met together for a *Lectio Divina* based on the Psalm and shared excerpts from their journals. This process was repeated for each of the six Psalms. Macdonald concluded that the participants had a

meaningful conversation with the Psalms. In exploring the extent to which the conversation is theological, i.e. is referenced to God, [...] the less religiously active respondents moved nearer to contemplating a relationship with God, although none claim to have had an encounter with Ultimate being. (2007, p. 186)

This work is located within the field of practical theology and reflects Macdonald's interest in scripture engagement, but the aims of this study were different to the emerging research question I have identified. He considered if meditating on the Psalms was of spiritual benefit for these young adults, whereas I am more interested in the act of Bible reading. His participants were from a variety of nationalities whilst my focus is upon British people.

Alan Le Grys (2010) considered how 22 people might read Psalm 23 and Psalm 36.⁴⁵ Two participants were Jewish, 15 were Christian (five Pentecostal, five Anglican and five Catholic) and five identified as "non-churchgoers." All of them lived in England, although not all the Pentecostal and Catholic participants were born in England. Of the five non-churchgoers four of them had been brought-up attending church and none actively practised another religion. Le Grys compared and contrasted how these different groups read the Psalms.⁴⁶

⁴³ The other participants were from a variety of faiths (or none) and five attended church on a yearly or twice yearly basis (Macdonald, 2009, p. 197).

⁴⁴ The Psalms were, 126, 55, 22, 74, 30 and 73. In light of the pilot study, these Psalms were chosen as they were felt to have values or subject matter which the participants could easily relate to (Macdonald, 2009, p. 198).

⁴⁵ My thanks to Andrew Rogers who alerted me to this study.

⁴⁶ He found the interviews became too long if both Psalms were discussed, so he focused on Psalm 23.

In a one-to-one interview setting, each of the 22 participants discussed their up-bringing and various issues related to the Christian faith, such as the Bible.⁴⁷ They were also invited to read through the Psalms and discuss them. In contrast to Macdonald, Le Grys concluded:

There appears to be little expectation that Bible reading might be drawing the reader into a closer relationship with God. This finding is confirmed by the evidence from the non-church goers, who also appeared to regard the Bible primarily as a resource for moral and doctrinal teaching. Scripture is essentially a guidance manual for right belief and right behaviour. (2010, p. 60)

In part, the difference in conclusions reflects the differing aims and methods of each piece of work. Ultimately, Le Grys' research did not address my research question, for he principally focused on how Christians from different traditions read the Bible and to what extent their reading was normative, formative and transformative (2010, pp. 6, 132-134). The inclusion of non-churchgoers was as a source of comparison with the Christian community (p. 13). Furthermore, the majority of the non-churchgoing participants had grown up attending church regularly which influenced their attitude towards, and reading of, the Bible.

The final research project I am aware of is being undertaken by Tiffany Webster, and is entitled *When the Bible Meets the Black Stuff: A Contextual Bible Study Experiment* (2015).⁴⁸ Webster carried out ten CBS sessions over a ten month period with a group of five South Derbyshire coalminers. In light of her identity as a pagan, and her participants being men who do not regularly attend church or read the Bible,⁴⁹ she adapted CBS, eliminating the need for the facilitator and participants to be Christians or consider themselves marginalised. She also removed the need for the facilitator to ask questions and amended the final "Action Plan" phase of CBS to include therapy and self-growth.

⁴⁷ There were other components to his research, such as a series of Bible studies which he led and a questionnaire which was distributed amongst his own church members.

⁴⁸ Much of what follows was detailed in email correspondence with Webster, at present her work has not been widely published.

⁴⁹ A few did describe themselves as "cultural Christians but not practising Christians."

Her aim was not primarily to see what contextually sensitive readings would emerge in light of their social location as coalminers.⁵⁰ Instead, she planned to critically refine CBS in order to widen its future scope and inclusivity, with specific emphasis on adapting CBS for use in the West. Unfortunately the men were all made redundant whilst undertaking the research and the subsequent CBS sessions became a pseudo-therapeutic setting where they were able to verbalise their feelings associated with the pit closure.

Webster's research did examine how people who do not regularly read the Bible would read it, but this was a secondary concern. Principally, she set out to re-design CBS for her own context. Thus there still remains the need to undertake a piece of research which primarily addresses the question: How would a person who does not regularly read the Bible or go to church, read the Bible?

Many who promote contextual Bible reading, do so understanding that those taking part are often unheard voices, usually found at the margins of society or the church (West, 1993; Riches, 2010). Paradoxically in Britain, it is the largest group within society who have not been given the opportunity to voice their readings of the Bible. The case could be restated thus: As the turn to the reader has highlighted, each person (and reading group) engages with a text in a unique way. However, the Bible has been typically read from "two traditional hermeneutical spaces: the academic space and the ecclesial space" (Richard, 1996, p. 312). Pablo Richard argues that a third hermeneutical space, one free from the domination of the academy and the church, is required for an "indigenous" interpretation.⁵¹ This thesis therefore will focus upon those who do not regularly read the Bible or go to church, for they are under-represented in this field of research.

Conclusion

This chapter began by noting the "turn to the reader" which had occurred in literary theory and hermeneutics. I then suggested that this "turn" had impacted biblical studies and theology, demonstrating this by presenting three diverse subfields within these disciplines. I noted that in practical theology, scholars are using social scientific tools to consider how lay

⁵⁰ She chose ten texts which dealt with subjects pertinent to coalmining, such as Employee-Employer relationships (Jeremiah 18:1-12 and Matthew 20: 1-16) or Hell/Darkness/Death/Condemnation (Job 17:1-16 and Revelation 20:1-15).

⁵¹ My readers differ from those whom Richard imagines taking part, for they are not interested in the Bible nor seek to appropriate it (1996, p. 313).

people read the Bible. In biblical studies, scholars are writing themselves into their textual analysis, aware that their ideology, social location and/or life experience informs their reading. Finally, some of these scholars have also promoted Bible reading methods, such as CBS, which acknowledge and value the reader's contribution.

However what this survey demonstrates is that most of the research being carried out into Bible reading concerns regular Bible readers be they clergy, laity or academics. In Britain the majority of the population cannot be described as regular Bible readers and are missing from this field of study. Finally, three recent research projects were presented that to some degree involved non-regular Bible readers, but none of these projects directly addressed how the Bible was being read, showing the need for my own inquiry.

Having established the appropriateness of my broad research question, the following chapter turns to consider the methodological options available, for the nature of the research question informs the methodology which is adopted (David & Sutton, 2011, pp. 13-15). I argue for the use of a qualitative case study and for the narrowing of the research in two ways. First, the profile of the participants is considered, for the type of sample would influence the results of the study and the British population is varied one. Second, it seemed improbable that people would read the entire Bible, so I had to select individual passages which my participants would read. In this way, my initial research question was further refined and a bespoke research project began to emerge.

CHAPTER 2: Research Design – Methodology, Sample and Texts

Research often begins with a broad research question or topic which is refined over time (Lee, 2009, pp. 70-71; Walshaw, 2012, pp. 28-43). In my case there were three aspects of the proposed enquiry which now required consideration: the methodological underpinning, the participant profile and the biblical texts. This chapter argues that because of the inductive nature of my research enquiry a qualitative methodology and case study approach are best suited to addressing this topic. In light of this decision, my participant selection is then considered. I revisit some of the surveys presented in Chapter 1, highlighting the gender differences which they found, for it was men who were least likely to read the Bible regularly (Field, 2014). Accordingly, I decide to focus on British men rather than the population in general. Finally, I suggest the use of five particular texts for it is unlikely that my volunteers would be willing to read the whole Bible. In this way the foundations of my research project are put in place.

Methodology – A Qualitative Case Study

Quantitative and qualitative methodologies are two approaches commonly used by social scientists. One difference between these two avenues of research lies in the kind of knowledge they are trying to access about the social world (Sarantakos, 2013, p. 29). A quantitative methodology is concerned with general patterns and trends, often assuming a deductive approach. It has a more objective view of the social world, and deals with numbers and percentages, thus the size and representativity of the sample are crucial (Sarantakos, 2013, pp. 365-403). The surveys I highlighted in Chapter 1 are based on this methodology, for they involved large numbers of British people answering questions concerning their views of the Bible, religion or Christianity. For instance Christian Research (2011) interviewed 1,018 people and Tearfund (2007) interviewed 7,000. Similarly, Andrew Village's (2007) study into lay Anglicans' reading of Mark 9:14-29, assumed a quantitative methodology, using a questionnaire which over 400 participants completed.

A qualitative methodology focuses more on particular experiences and processes. It often takes an inductive approach, a subjective and relational view of the social world, and deals with words and meanings, thus depth of analysis rather than sample size is key (Snape & Spencer, 2003, pp. 3-5). This methodology is more commonly used by those who are

exploring the nature of Bible reading practices, for they are often undertaking research which seeks to detail processes or shed light on implicit practices which are not easily accessed through a quantitative approach. For example, Brian Malley adopts a qualitative methodology to explore the “cognitive and social processes that cause evangelical Christians to feel that the Bible is ‘living and active’ in their lives” (2004, p. 1). Andrew Rogers also chooses a qualitative methodology in order to study “the shape of ordinary hermeneutics within English evangelical churches,” (2009, p. 15).⁵² These two scholars limit their research to one (Malley) or two (Rogers) churches rather than hundreds as might be the case if they had used a quantitative methodology. However, what is lost in numerical sample size is gained in depth of analysis, for a more holistic perspective is seen and the different interlocking aspects of Bible engagement identified and teased out, (Denscombe, 2007, p. 53).⁵³

Like Malley and Rogers, my own research is best suited to a qualitative methodology for I too am not attempting to prove a particular hypothesis or challenge an established theory, rather I am seeking to understand and describe how the Bible is read. My research question is an open one and assumes an in-depth investigation of the complex activity of reading will be required, one where the data produced will direct the analysis. This lends itself to a smaller sample, from which rich detailed data can emerge and shape the subsequent lines of enquiry.

Although I have presented quantitative and qualitative methodologies as distinct separate approaches, they are not mutually exclusive. Matthew David and Carole Sutton, argue that all research contains both quantitative and qualitative elements (2011, p. 96), and Colin Robson highlights the emergence of “multi-strategy research” which consciously incorporates both elements into the research design (2011, pp. 29-30). With reference to the study of religion, and in particular ordinary theology, Jeff Astley argues for the inclusion of both methodologies:

Where qualitative research adopts what has been described as an “inner perspective” on the phenomena being studied, quantitative research facilitates an

⁵² He also asked: “How are ordinary hermeneutics mediated both internally (from within the church) and externally (from without the church)? How transformative of congregational horizons are these configurations of ordinary hermeneutics? How might these configurations be more transformative?” (Rogers, 2009, p. 15).

⁵³ Further examples of this qualitative approach to Bible reading research include Wuthnow (1994a; 1994b), Davie (1995), Bielo (2009) and Le Grys (2010).

“outer perspective”. I believe that each has its own contribution to make in the study of ordinary theology. (2002, p. 98)

An example of this methodological blurring is Fergus Macdonald’s work, which I described in the preceding chapter. He assumes a deductive approach, linked to a quantitative methodology, because he is testing a hypothesis regarding people’s spiritual engagement with certain Psalms. However, he uses methods commonly identified with qualitative research because he wants to capture the personal, subjective element of these readings (2007, p. 45). In my case, having argued for the appropriateness of a qualitative methodology, I will on occasion use tables (Table 1) or charts (Figures 10, 11 and 12) to present my data, and will refer to numbers and percentages on occasion. My use of these devices normally associated with quantitative studies does not reflect the introduction of an alternative methodology, but rather is an attempt to present certain parts of my data in an accessible way.

Under “qualitative research” different research methods and approaches can be used. One of those growing in popularity is the case study (Yin, 2014). There is no single agreed definition of “case study” (Gerring, 2007, p. 17), however to some degree or other it usually “refers to research that investigates a few cases, often just one, in considerable depth” (Hammersley & Gomm, 2000, p. 3). The objective of it is “a deep understanding of the actors, interactions, sentiments, and behaviours occurring for a specific process through time” (Woodside, 2010, p. 16).⁵⁴ This focus on depth and detail correlates closely with the qualitative methodology I have adopted and by choosing to undertake a case study my research is provided with an appropriate boundary for it enables me to focus on one particular reading site (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Case studies are also particularly sensitive to the context of the research (Harding, 2013, p. 16), thus I decided to define my project as a case study and so locate my fieldwork at one site rather than multiple sites. Such a decision fits with the contextual nature of reading which understands that every site informs the readings hosted there (Riches, 2010, pp. 23-24), and so by focusing on one site I should gain insights particular to it.

⁵⁴ Some, like Martyn Hammersley and Roger Gomm (2000), indicate that a case study always involves investigating a natural phenomenon. This is not the case in my situation for my participants are not men who regularly read the Bible. This does not invalidate my use of the term “case study,” for as Gary Thomas (2011) and John Gerring (2007) helpfully demonstrate case studies can be undertaken in experimental settings, such as asking men who do not regularly read the Bible to read parts of it.

I am not alone in undertaking a case study to explore how the Bible is read by a particular individual or group. James Bielo (2009b) also undertook a case study exploring the place and function of Bible study groups in the lives of American evangelical Christians, and in part I follow Bielo's example in my thesis. He undertook an ethnographic study involving 19 different Bible study groups (attending 324 Bible study meetings), but only reflects on five of them in *Words Upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study* (2009b, p. 5). The five which he discusses are each presented as individual case studies highlighting a different aspect integral to evangelical Bible study, for which that group offered a particularly clear example, although the phenomenon was found amongst other groups as well. The five aspects which he presents are biblical authority/ideology and the related interpretive practice, developing intimacy in Bible study, the role of shared interests for a group, using Bible study to prepare to witness, and the place of Bible study in the formation of religious identity. However, all five case studies are part of one single study which has one central claim, that "Evangelical Bible study is organized by a series of practices, logics and tensions that are deeply embedded in the broader cultural scene of American Evangelicalism" (2009b, p. 5).

Bielo's decision to present five of his 19 groups was his way of balancing the need for breadth and depth in research. He could have focused upon one group and so produce something of considerable depth but limited breadth, or he could have incorporated all 19 groups into a much broader piece, but one where no one group was extensively considered. Some scholars who have explored Bible reading practices have assumed a "narrow and deep" approach. For instance, Mike Jennings (2011) studied how the Bible was spiritually engaged with by nine Christians (or people on the edge of Christianity). However, in order to adequately chart the interweaving nature of Bible reading he did not consider all nine participants in depth but rather focused upon one reader's engagement with the Bible (Simon), who Jennings presents as representative of the group. This approach provides a rich description of one reader, and is valued by qualitative research on account of its thoroughness. This attention to detail also increases the validity of the claims made regarding Simon's reading. However, it does result in the other eight participants being side-lined and a lack of evidence that Simon was representative of the wider group.

Other scholars, like Fergus Macdonald (2007; 2009) or Alan Le Grys (2010), adopted a "broad and shallow" approach. They present their participants as one unit, often providing quotes from different readers to demonstrate either the centrality of a theme or the divergence

found within the group. This approach enables all the participants to be represented within the thesis and the use of multiple members to evidence key findings is an established technique used to demonstrate the validity of the themes presented. However, by giving voice to all the participants less depth and context is given to each, and so there is the danger of misrepresentation.

There is no perfect approach and I will attempt to navigate a middle road, as Bielo does. I will present my data as one case study, with one central claim, which is comprised of a series of mini arguments. At times these are made using individual readers as case studies, reflecting a “narrow and deep” approach. For example, when arguing for the influence of the reader’s experiences upon their reading of the biblical texts, I present two readers who illustrate the point. By focusing upon two men in depth, I can provide the thick descriptions which are required. These participants should be understood to represent a wider group of men within this case study, but not the whole cohort of participants. However, on the occasion that the findings relate to all the participants, such as the influence of their beliefs upon their reading, I present data from a much wider number of readers, which leans towards the “broad and shallow” approach. In this way then I attempt to balance the need for depth and breadth in my thesis, using my data as one single case study, but often focusing on particular men, as individual case studies, to demonstrate a specific finding uncovered within part of the group.

Qualitative case studies have a particular weakness: inappropriate generalising or comparing of cases. George Steinmetz unpacks the multifaceted argument that the findings from one case study should not be compared with another (or other research findings) for they are incommensurable (2004, pp. 384-390). At its heart this view stems from an understanding that different terms or traits found in one context cannot be naïvely matched to corresponding terms or traits from another (Handler, 2009). Furthermore comparing cases can lead to misappropriation, misrepresentation, exoticization, essentialization and other-ing. The result of comparing cases can be distortion (Povinelli, 2001). Nonetheless, comparing cases can also produce insights which were not obvious prior to the comparison and contribute to a greater awareness of the topic being considered (Handler, 2009). To that end, aware of the dangers mentioned above, I have chosen to bring my data into conversation with other case studies, ethnographies, surveys, insights from literary theorists, social psychologists and others, understanding that in doing so my own findings will be further illuminated and links

made across academic disciplines. The result of this should be a strong and expansive interdisciplinary thesis.

There are other weaknesses associated with this approach, for example a lack of reflexivity on the part of the researcher can detract from the study (Mason, 2002), and a desire for thick rich descriptions can produce too much data and so swamp the researcher (Le Grys, 2010). However, these potential pitfalls do not mean that undertaking a qualitative case study is a fraught process, rather aware of these dangers I hoped that what was produced could accommodate them. Indeed, by focusing on one setting in greater depth, case studies have been useful in problematizing commonly held assumptions (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Gerring, 2007, pp. 37-63). My case study will contribute to the ongoing discussion on real readers reading the Bible in Britain by giving voice to some men from a particular subgroup of society who have never been heard.

Theoretical Sampling – A Focus on Men

The implication of a qualitative methodology upon my sampling approach is that I will not attempt to gain a large, representative cohort of the British population but instead I will concentrate on a small select group who meet the required criteria (Snape & Spencer, 2003, pp. 3-5). The Bible reading surveys mentioned in the previous chapter were instrumental in guiding this process, for they showed that men were less likely to have an interest in the Bible than women. For example, Christian Research found that 83% of men compared with 73% of women either hardly ever or never read the Bible (2011, p. 44) and men were less likely to have a Bible at home (45% compared with 59% of women), (p. 31). Other research has produced similar findings. For instance, David Clines also noted that men (61%) are less likely to own a Bible compared with women (81%), and they are more likely to have a dismissive attitude towards the Bible (35% compared with 18% of women) (1997, p. 68). In light of much of this Field concludes: “On all measures women are somewhat more Bible-centric than men,” (2014, p. 518).⁵⁵ He goes on to suggest that the present-day profile of the person least likely to read the Bible is a male, who does not go to church, is under the age of 25 and comes from social band DE (pp. 507, 518). Jan Harrison (1983) concluded something similar approximately 30 years ago, when she noted that the person least likely to own a Bible was a male, who seldom or never attends church, is under the age of 34 and comes

⁵⁵ This gender difference is often seen in young people as well (Freathy, 2006).

from social class C2 or DE. She further adds that they left school at 15, have children under 10 years of age in the household, are not working, live in a city, are single, have an unfavourable attitude to the church, find God unimportant in their lives and identify as Roman Catholic.⁵⁶

These figures are comparable with the gender difference noted amongst churchgoers, for within Britain, it is also men who are least likely to attend church. A nationwide survey by Tearfund in 2007 concluded that:

Women are more regular churchgoers than men (19% vs 11%) and also more likely to be infrequent attendees or open de-churched (18% vs. 12% men). Men are much more likely to be closed non-churched i.e. with no prior experience of church and unlikely to change their ways. (2007, p. 8)

These differences are part of a much wider phenomenon, for in post-industrial countries it has been consistently found that men are less religious than women (Davie & Walter, 1998; Trzebiatowska & Bruce, 2012). The reasons for this are presently being explored by sociologists. For example, Grace Davie (2007) suggests it may be due to women being more closely involved with aspects of life which, to some degree, have a sacred status, such as birth and death. On the other hand, Marta Trzebiatowska and Steve Bruce (2012), argue the primary cause is a time lag, where men rather than women were influenced earlier by secularizing forces and so are further ahead in their marginalising of religion. Whatever the reason, the lack of male Bible readers should be understood as being part of this bigger context.

The gender difference in Bible reading must be qualified though, for the data is not as clear cut as might be assumed and there are settings where the gender divide disappears. For instance, although Christian Research (2011) noted a 10% difference between those men who hardly ever or never read the Bible and their female counterparts, when the figures were collated to measure the percentage of people who were regular Bible readers, the divide was reduced to 2%. That is, 12% of men and 14% of women said they were regular Bible readers. Indeed more men (6%) than women (5%) indicated that they engaged with the Bible on a

⁵⁶ Both affirm that older, church going women are the most likely members of the British population to read the Bible (Field, 2014; Harrison, 1983).

daily basis. Similarly, following the 2005 Church Census, Peter Brierley noted the obvious male/female divide, concluding that 57% of those attending church were female and 43% were male. However, he then highlighted that women are leaving the church faster than men and that there are certain denominations: New Churches, Pentecostals and Independents, where there is either no gender difference or a minimal one of 1 or 2%, (2006, pp. 131, 135 and 136).

On account of my interest in those who are not regular Bible readers or churchgoers, and because of the gender difference I highlighted earlier, I decided to limit my sample to men. I did so aware of, and sensitive to, the qualification I have just noted. The decision to focus solely on men does not mean that this is a study exploring the impact of gender upon reading, although in Chapter 6 I will reflect upon the impact of my participants' gender upon one finding because it was a potential influencing factor. Others have undertaken research which directly addresses the issue of gender and reading, comparing and contrasting male and female readers (Crawford & Chaffin, 1986; Bleich, 1986; Hartley, 2001, pp. 25-71; Summers, 2013), or explored readings by those who do not fit the male/female binary such as transsexuals (Curtis, 2000) or those with intersex conditions (Cornwall, 2013). This leaves the door open to further research, which could incorporate a comparative element if the subject of gender was going to be directly addressed. In this way then, the gender difference which is typically seen in Bible reading research resulted in a further refinement of my research. I was no longer exploring how British people would read the Bible, rather I was now concentrating on British men.

My decision to concentrate on men is a demonstration of theoretical sampling. This is a form of sampling in which the researcher is

selecting groups or categories to study on the basis of their relevance to your research questions your theoretical position and analytical framework, your analytical practice, and more importantly the argument or explanation you are developing. (Mason, 2002, p. 124)

In my case, because studies show that men are less inclined to read the Bible and so more likely to meet my research criteria, I concentrate solely on them. Theoretical sampling is a

form of sampling closely related to Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and is compatible with snowball sampling, an approach I also use (as Chapter 3 will show).

There were two further ways in which I could have narrowed my participant selection. First, I could have concentrated on those who fitted the earlier profile of the person least likely to read the Bible: young men from social band DE who do not go to church (Field, 2014, Harrison, 1983). Second, I could have followed the example of Theos (2012) and others,⁵⁷ by focusing on men who identify as “not religious.”⁵⁸ However, it seemed reasonable to assume a degree of difficulty in getting people to participate in this project, for I would be asking men who probably had no interest in the Bible to read it. Unsurprisingly Christian Research found that when asked if they could be encouraged to read the Bible more, only 8% of those surveyed said “yes” while 77% said “no” and 15% said “don’t know” (2011, pp. 57-59).⁵⁹ I therefore decided not to further narrow down my selection process in either of these two ways, as it may have made recruitment too difficult.

These decisions highlight three potential avenues of further research. First, although women read the Bible more and Christian women’s reading practices have been explored (Radway, 1991; Neal, 2006; Weaver-Zercher, 2013), there is a lack of Bible reading research amongst women who are not regular Bible readers. Second, the significant overlap between the Harrison’s and Field’s profiles of those least likely to read the Bible,⁶⁰ suggests that studying this subgroup of society and their views and readings of the Bible would be important. Such a study could shed light on contemporary issues of biblical literacy and Bible engagement. So too, exploring Bible readings by those who identify as “nonreligious” would contribute to the emerging research on this growing cohort of society. Callum Brown and Gordon Lynch note that “for younger people born since the 1960s, a position of ‘non-religion’ became not so much a conscious choice, but the default position” (2012, pp. 337-338).

⁵⁷ Including Lee (2012), Bullivant & Lee (2012), Voas & McAndrew (2012) and Sheard (2014).

⁵⁸ This may have meant undertaking the fieldwork in Norwich, the city with the highest proportion (42.5%) of people who indicated they had “no religion” in the 2011 Census of England and Wales.

⁵⁹ The two top reasons given by those who said that they could not be encouraged to read the Bible more were a lack of interest, and not considering themselves religious enough (Christian Research, 2011, pp. 57-59).

⁶⁰ Field incorporated Harrison’s findings into his own data set, so they are not a true comparison.

Five Biblical Texts

Selection Criteria

Having decided to narrow down my research to men, a further refinement concerned the Bible, for it was unlikely that any of my anticipated participants would be willing to read it in its entirety.⁶¹ Other scholars who undertook empirical research into how the Bible was being read focused on one or two preselected texts (Village, 2007; Le Grys, 2010) or a series of passages (Macdonald, 2007; Webster, 2015). In a similar fashion I too would have to choose one or more texts for my own study and in doing so the research question would be nuanced, for I would no longer be exploring how people read the Bible, rather how they read (a) particular text(s). As I began to consider which, and how many, biblical texts should be used, nine principles guided my selection. These principles were identified in light of the ethical, practical and theoretical considerations associated with this research.

First, a variety of genres should be represented. Unlike Webster (2015) who specifically chose texts which she believed coalminers could relate to or Macdonald (2007) who identified the Psalms as a genre well suited to a postmodern context, I wanted to uncover how the Bible would be read. To that end, the texts I chose should cover as wide a biblical spectrum as possible, and include passages that appear relevant and others that do not. However, the genres included should be ones which the men, to some degree, were familiar with. This increases the accessibility of the texts, resulting in a greater understanding of them and greater confidence for the reader. This was important, as some participants may have never read the Bible and so might have felt apprehensive about the actual task of reading, unsure as to what to expect. Accordingly, apocalyptic material was excluded, for although the term “apocalypse” is in common use, along with others such as “Armageddon,” the genre is unfamiliar to most people.

Second, the readers would need to engage with at least two biblical texts, in order to accommodate different genres. Indeed the more texts they would be willing to read, the more data would be produced and the greater degree of comparison and analysis which could take

⁶¹ I am aware that I am referring to the Bible as a single, uncontested text, even though this is not the case (Carroll, 1997, pp.14-21). There are a number of Bibles each one acting as a unified collection of sacred texts for certain communities. For example, with reference to the Old Testament, the Protestant Church has 39 books, the Roman Catholic Church has 46, the Orthodox Church has 49 and the Ethiopian Christians have between 46 and 54 (Wooden, 2008, pp. 130-131). As I will document, because Protestant Christianity and Roman Catholicism are the two main Christian traditions in Britain, I chose texts which were found in both of their Bibles.

place. The imagined location of the fieldwork contributed to this decision, for by choosing to study those who are outside the Church I wanted to avoid the use of an ecclesiastical reading site, for the nature of the site may inform the readings which take place there. One possibility was to locate the fieldwork in a workplace where men could undertake the research during their lunch breaks. To that end I decided that five biblical texts, one text per lunchtime, would be the optimum number. The project could be presented as one which would involve reading a different biblical text each day for one week. This seemed a reasonable request and time frame. It was not too onerous for the participants, which would have discouraged uptake, and it had the potential to produce a large amount of data.

Third, although the genres should be familiar to the reader, the texts should not. Village found a difference between reading a familiar and an unfamiliar biblical text. Readers who were familiar with the text were more likely to see it as relevant to their life (2007, pp. 86-87) whilst those who were unfamiliar with it “tended to perceive it as more distant and opaque” (2007, p. 94). To minimize this variable I decided to use texts which were probably unfamiliar to all my participants. In light of my selection criteria it was unlikely that my participants would have a good knowledge of the Bible, but it was not impossible. Most, if not all, would have been exposed to the Bible through British culture and media, at school and at any Christian festivals or services which they may have attended, such as a carol service or a wedding (Edwards, 2015). Some may even have regularly attended church or Sunday school in the past. Therefore the texts should be unfamiliar, even to the participants who might have attended church in the past.

Fourth, although I wanted the texts to be unfamiliar, the language used and the subject matter needed to be accessible. This was of particular importance, for if any participants felt anxious about taking part and then were faced with a text whose language they found unfamiliar and content confusing, they might decide to withdraw. Susannah Cornwall and David Nixon faced a similar challenge when facilitating four CBS sessions with a group of homeless and vulnerably-housed people. In their case they decided to read the Bible passage aloud to address issues of accessibility and literacy (2011, p. 13). The reading of the passage to the group is standard CBS methodology, due in part to the communities in which CBS takes place, for all those present may not have sufficient literary skills to read (West, 2011, p. 435). However, I was exploring how men would read the Bible and for this reason the text could not be read to them, they would have to read it for themselves.

To that end I surveyed English translations of the Bible, in an attempt to find one which was accessible to the general population by using contemporary language and having a low reading level. Of the options available, the New Living Translation (NLT) stood out as it had been revised in 2007 and had a reading level of 6.3 (Mardel, n.d.),⁶² so a person aged 11 or older should be able to read it.⁶³ This, I hoped, would mean that men with high and low literacy levels could engage with the texts, without anyone feeling disadvantaged. Mardel (n.d.) describes the NLT as sitting in the middle of the formal/dynamic equivalence translation scale,⁶⁴ others however place it more towards the dynamic equivalence side (Zondervan, n.d.). I viewed this positively, for it lends itself to a more accessible translation thereby giving the readers greater confidence as they engaged with the texts. The main concern regarding this translation was its language, for it was principally written for a North American readership which might result in the use of colloquialisms or phrases which are uncommon in Britain. I was however willing to explore the use of this translation.

Fifth, each text should be, as far as possible, a complete literary unit so that the reader could make sense of it without its wider literary context. Sixth, the texts must have some content with which the reader could engage, but should be too boring, or acutely provocative. Therefore I avoided potentially boring passages, such as a list of Benjamin's descendant's (1Chronicles 8:1-40), and overly provocative texts, for instance dealing with rape and murder (Judges 19:1-30). Furthermore, a provocative text may lead the readers to exclusively focus on the issue presented in the text rather than the actual act of reading and so skew the data and findings. It may also raise issues and emotions within the participants to which as a researcher I would be ill equipped to respond. For this reason, Alison Peden also avoided using provocative texts in her CBS sessions with a group of women prisoners, even though she was a chaplain (2005). Seventh, all the texts should be of similar length so as to provide a degree of uniformity and routineness to the research task. Again, this sense of routineness

⁶² Other possible translations included the New Century Version (published in 1991 with a reading level of 5.6), the Contemporary English Version (published in 1995 with a reading level of 5.4), and The Message (published in 2001, with a reading level of 5.5 to 10 depending upon the passage) (Mardel, n.d.).

⁶³ By comparison, someone aged 9 or older is said to be able to read the *Sun* newspaper, and a person aged 16 or older is thought to be able to read the *Guardian* newspaper (Guy, 2015, p. 29).

⁶⁴ This is a scale used by translators to indicate the degree to which the translation is word for word (formal equivalence) or thought for thought (dynamic equivalence) (Nida & Taber, 1982; Fee & Strauss, 2007, pp. 26-28, 145-157).

would be important so that over time the participants would feel more relaxed and confident, aware that there were no unexpected surprises.

Eighth, the texts should be found in both the Roman Catholic and Protestant Bibles for they are the two Christian traditions most commonly found in England (Brierley, 2006, p. 156). This therefore excluded books found in the Apocrypha as those participants from a Protestant background may not consider them to be biblical. Ninth, there were various ethical parameters which guided both the research design and the subsequent fieldwork, and these are considered in greater depth in Chapter 3. However, with reference to the text selection criteria, a need to ensure that the project was not proselytism in the guise of research, meant that the texts must not be concerned with conversion to Christianity such as in the story of Lydia's conversion in Acts 16:11-15. Likewise it should not have a popular historical role in evangelising, like John 3:16. Furthermore, not all the texts should present God or religion in a favourable light, as this could also be considered an attempt to proselytise. Having these criteria in place I then undertook a survey of the Bible and chose five texts which met the criteria, they were 2 John, Proverbs 10:1-11, 2 Samuel 5:17-25, Psalm 88 and Matthew 18:21-35.

2 John

¹This letter is from John, the elder.

I am writing to the chosen lady and to her children, whom I love in the truth—as does everyone else who knows the truth – ²because the truth lives in us and will be with us forever.

³Grace, mercy, and peace, which come from God the Father and from Jesus Christ—the Son of the Father—will continue to be with us who live in truth and love.

⁴How happy I was to meet some of your children and find them living according to the truth, just as the Father commanded.

⁵I am writing to remind you, dear friends, that we should love one another. This is not a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning. ⁶Love means doing what God has commanded us, and he has commanded us to love one another, just as you heard from the beginning.

⁷I say this because many deceivers have gone out into the world. They deny that Jesus Christ came in a real body. Such a person is a deceiver and an antichrist. ⁸Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked so hard to achieve. Be diligent so that you receive your full

reward. ⁹Anyone who wanders away from this teaching has no relationship with God. But anyone who remains in the teaching of Christ has a relationship with both the Father and the Son.

¹⁰If anyone comes to your meeting and does not teach the truth about Christ, don't invite that person into your home or give any kind of encouragement. ¹¹Anyone who encourages such people becomes a partner in their evil work.

¹²I have much more to say to you, but I don't want to do it with paper and ink. For I hope to visit you soon and talk with you face to face. Then our joy will be complete.

¹³Greetings from the children of your sister, chosen by God.

(2 John, [New Living Translation])

I was keen to include a letter because it would be a familiar genre. The letter of 2 John is one of the shortest books of the Bible, its length corresponds “to the conventionally brief length of a private letter which, at the time, would have been written on a single papyrus sheet of standard size” (Smalley, 1984, p. 314). In my context it fitted comfortably onto an A4 page with room for annotation.⁶⁵

Even though the genre was one I felt the readers would recognise, I did not think this was a text they would easily relate to, for it is addressed to a first century group of Christians responding to a particular situation they faced. 2 John presents itself as a letter from “John, the elder” to “the chosen lady and to her children” (2 John 1) and its content deals with issues related to church life. Raymond Brown describes it as: “A letter from the Presbyter to a church warning against any reception of secessionist teachers who are spreading christological and moral errors” (1982, p. 643). I did not imagine that these issues would be of interest to my participants, but because the relevance of the passage was not important to my study, this did not disqualify it.

The text fulfilled all the criteria set out earlier, but there were two phrases which may have been viewed as offensive by some of the readers. First, the word “antichrist” (2 John 7) is used to describe someone who denies that “Jesus came in a real body” (2 John 7). Second, the directive not to invite a person into your home if they do “not teach the truth about Christ” (2 John 10) is also present. Nevertheless, these comments principally seem to address false

⁶⁵ See Appendix E for a copy of the text as it appeared in Manual 5.

teachers within a church, not those outside it (Thompson, 1992, pp. 14-18; Brown, 1982, pp. 69-71; Marshall, 1978, pp. 68-75), and for this reason I did not consider it to be inappropriately provocative for my participants. This then was the first passage which I included in my study and it resulted in the subsequent texts needing to be of a similar length to 2 John.

Proverbs 10:1-11

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1 | A wise child brings joy to a father;
a foolish child brings grief to a mother. |
| 2 | Tainted wealth has no lasting value,
but right living can save your life. |
| 3 | The Lord will not let the godly go hungry,
but he refuses to satisfy the craving of the wicked. |
| 4 | Lazy people are soon poor;
hard workers get rich. |
| 5 | A wise youth harvests in the summer,
but one who sleeps during harvest is a disgrace. |
| 6 | The godly are showered with blessings;
the words of the wicked conceal violent intentions. |
| 7 | We have happy memories of the godly,
but the name of a wicked person rots away. |
| 8 | The wise are glad to be instructed,
but babbling fools fall flat on their faces. |
| 9 | People with integrity walk safely,
but those who follow crooked paths will slip and fall. |
| 10 | People who wink at wrong cause trouble,
but a bold reproof promotes peace. |
| 11 | The words of the godly are a life-giving fountain;
the words of the wicked conceal violent intentions |
| (Proverbs 10:1-11, [New Living Translation]) | |

Proverbs were chosen as this is another genre in use today and their content may have been more relevant to the lives of the men than that of 2 John. The book of Proverbs, as its name

suggests, primarily contains lists of short, pithy sayings, exhortations, warnings and expressions (Longman III, 2006, p. 21).

Proverbs 10:1-11 may be considered a literary unit. That is not to say that it has a beginning, middle and end, rather that it includes complete sections. Duane Garrett (1993, p. 59) suggests that aside from the introduction in 10:1a, it contains two main sections, 10:1b-5 and 6-11, Roland Murphy (1998, pp. 72-74) on the other hand describes three main sections in 10:1-5, 6-7, and 8-11. Not everyone agrees with these divisions. Some contend that there is no clear structure and that the individual proverbs are placed in a more random fashion (Longman III, 2006, p. 229; Perdue, 2000, pp. 163-164), whilst others suggest the division is 10:1-5 and 6-21 (Koptak, 2003, p. 283). Although there is an ongoing disagreement regarding the exact structure of these verses, following Murphy and Garrett I selected Proverbs 10:1-11, understanding that in a tentative way it formed a literary unit.

Compared with 2 John, I thought the content of this passage would be much more relevant to my potential participants. These eleven verses consider practical subjects such as wealth (Prov. 10:2), work ethic (Prov. 10:4) and wise living (Prov. 10:8) all of which are contemporary issues. Finally, this section of Proverbs begins with an introduction: “The proverbs of Solomon” (Prov. 10:1a). For stylistic purposes I decided to exclude this phrase but added it to the short descriptor provided for the participants, as Chapter 3 details.⁶⁶

2 Samuel 5:17-25

¹⁷When the Philistines heard that David had been anointed king of Israel, they mobilized all their forces to capture him. But David was told they were coming, so he went into the stronghold. ¹⁸The Philistines arrived and spread out across the valley of Rephaim. ¹⁹So David asked the Lord, “Should I go out to fight the Philistines? Will you hand them over to me?” The Lord replied to David, “Yes, go ahead. I will certainly hand them over to you.” ²⁰So David went to Baal-perazim and defeated the Philistines there. “The Lord did it!” David exclaimed. “He burst through my enemies like a raging flood!” So he named that place Baal-perazim (which means “the Lord who bursts through”). ²¹The Philistines had abandoned their idols there, so David and his men confiscated them.

⁶⁶ See also appendix G

²²But after a while the Philistines returned and again spread out across the valley of Rephaim. ²³And again David asked the Lord what to do. “Do not attack them straight on,” the Lord replied. “Instead, circle around behind and attack them near the poplar trees. ²⁴When you hear a sound like marching feet in the tops of the poplar trees, be on the alert! That will be the signal that the Lord is moving ahead of you to strike down the Philistine army.” ²⁵So David did what the Lord commanded, and he struck down the Philistines all the way from Gibeon to Gezer.

(2 Samuel 5:17-25, [New Living Translation])

The third text I selected was 2 Samuel 5:17-25. It is a narrative which recounts the Philistines twice going to fight the newly appointed king David, who with “the Lord’s” help defeats them on both occasions. This short section was the appropriate length and is viewed as a literary unit by many commentators (Anderson, 1989, p. 89; Brueggemann, 1990, p. 247; Bergen, 1996, p. 324-327). There are three main characters: David, the Philistines and “the Lord.” Two battles feature in the text, which is part of a much wider narrative and some of my participants may know the story of David and Goliath which is found earlier in the book of 1 Samuel. This text however is a relatively unfamiliar one, and because it focuses only on three characters and situates the events in one location, I assumed my reader’s would be able to easily engage with it.

As a text where God is seen to give David victory in a series of battles, a phenomenon that may be considered a type of “holy war” (Brueggemann, 1990, p. 247), this text had the potential to provoke, for there is a popular distrust of those who claim divine help or sanction when undertaking armed conflict. Particularly in light of the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa where some are claiming divine sanction for their actions. Importantly though, this text is different to those which recount people invading lands and killing the inhabitants at God’s command (Joshua 1-12), for in this text the Philistines are presented as the aggressors who come and challenge the newly crowned king. Therefore I hoped that this text was not an overly provocative one.

Matthew 18:21-35

²¹Then Peter came to him and asked, “Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?”

²²“No, not seven times,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven!”

²³“Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. ²⁴In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. ²⁵He couldn’t pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt.

²⁶“But the man fell down before his master and begged him, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.’ ²⁷Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt.

²⁸“But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment.

²⁹“His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it,’ he pleaded. ³⁰But his creditor wouldn’t wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full.

³¹“When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. ³²Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, ‘You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Shouldn’t you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.

³⁵“That’s what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.”

(Matthew 18:21-35, [New Living Translation])

It seemed appropriate to include a text which made reference to Jesus for he is a central character within Christianity. Therefore the fourth text was Matthew 18:21-35. The main part of this pericope is a parable which Jesus tells in response to the question: How often should I forgive someone who sins against me? (Matt. 18:21). This text is again a complete literary unit (Nolland, 2005, p. 751; Hagner, 1995, p. 534), of a suitable length and in a genre which the men would be familiar with, in so far as it is a story with a purpose or intent (Snodgrass, 2008).

This parable is not overly provocative nor about conversion to Christianity, but it does have a sting in the tail, ending with a warning directed at Jesus’ disciples that they must forgive or

they too will face punishment (Matt. 18:55-35; Luz, 2001, pp. 475-476). Once again because the warning is made to Jesus' disciples I thought my reader's would not feel threatened by it, as they would probably not identify with, or as, disciples of Jesus. The main concern I had was the NLT's use of the word "dollars" in place of the words "talents"⁶⁷ and "denarii"⁶⁸ which are typically used (Hagner, 1995, p. 539; Davies & Allison, 2004, p. 309). This was the only distinctly North American word which any of the five texts had, but I anticipated my participants would be familiar with the term.

Psalm 88

¹O Lord, God of my salvation,

I cry out to you by day.

I come to you at night.

²Now hear my prayer;

listen to my cry.

³For my life is full of troubles,

and death draws near.

⁴I am as good as dead,

like a strong man with no strength left.

⁵They have left me among the dead,

and I lie like a corpse in a grave.

I am forgotten,

cut off from your care.

⁶You have thrown me into the lowest pit,

into the darkest depths.

⁷Your anger weighs me down;

with wave after wave you have engulfed me.

Interlude

⁸You have driven my friends away

by making me repulsive to them.

⁶⁷ John Nolland notes that "10,000 talents would pay for something like 200,000 man-years of labour." (2005, p. 756). Accordingly, Ulrich Luz suggests that it could be expressed only in terms of "millions, or even billions" of dollars (2001, pp. 472-473).

⁶⁸ Donald Hagner (1995, p. 539) points out that the daily wage of a workman was a single denarius, and there were 6,000 denarii in a talent. Nolland (2005, p. 758) notes that the sum of 100 denarii is less than 1% of the debt owed by the first slave.

I am in a trap with no way of escape.

⁹ My eyes are blinded by my tears.

Each day I beg for your help, O Lord;

I lift my hands to you for mercy.

¹⁰ Are your wonderful deeds of any use to the dead?

Do the dead rise up and praise you?

Interlude

¹¹ Can those in the grave declare your unfailing love?

Can they proclaim your faithfulness in the place of destruction?

¹² Can the darkness speak of your wonderful deeds?

Can anyone in the land of forgetfulness talk about your righteousness?

¹³ O Lord, I cry out to you.

I will keep on pleading day by day.

¹⁴ O Lord, why do you reject me?

Why do you turn your face from me?

¹⁵ I have been sick and close to death since my youth.

I stand helpless and desperate before your terrors.

¹⁶ Your fierce anger has overwhelmed me.

Your terrors have paralyzed me.

¹⁷ They swirl around me like floodwaters all day long.

They have engulfed me completely.

¹⁸ You have taken away my companions and loved ones.

Darkness is my closest friend.

(Psalm 88, [New Living Translation])

The final text was Psalm 88, which again met the required selection criteria. In light of the other four texts portraying God, religion or Jesus positively, I wanted to include a text where this was not the case. As a Psalm of lament, Psalm 88 is one where the author cries out to God but God does not reply; the text concludes with the phrase, “Darkness is my closest friend” (Psalm 88:18). Walter Brueggemann (1995, p. 56) notes that in “this Psalm, there is no hint of an answer, response, or resolution from God. The speaker addresses what is apparently an empty sky and an indifferent throne.” The main issue with this Psalm is its length, as it normally requires 41 lines of text, which was significantly longer than the other

passages. However, if the Psalm is printed with each phrase directly proceeding from the next, then it appears of similar length to the other texts. By doing so the Psalm could be included in this research, but its poetic structure would not be as clearly seen. In light of its negative and hopeless tone towards God I included it and sought to compensate for its layout by describing it as a “song” in its short descriptor.⁶⁹

Prior to the actual Psalm commencing there is a short directive “For the choir director: A psalm of the descendants of Korah. A song to be sung to the tune ‘The Suffering of Affliction.’ A psalm of Heman the Ezrahite.” I decided to omit this directive for two reasons. First, there was no space to accommodate it in light of the Psalm’s length. Second, I was concerned that the inclusion of names like “Korah” or “Heman the Ezrahite” would obscure the text for the readers. The Psalm also contains a probable musical directive which the NLT renders as “interlude,” and is more commonly translated “Selah” (Tate, 1990, p. 394; Hossfeld & Zenger, 2005, p. 389) occurring at the end of verses 7 and 10. Again it did not appear to add to the Psalm’s accessibility, rather I thought it might confuse the participants, and it was omitted.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued for three foundational layers which will shape my subsequent study. First, I suggested that a qualitative methodology was best suited to addressing my research question, and by identifying it as a case study I could concentrate on one reading site in depth. Then, by assuming a theoretical sampling approach I decided to focus solely on men who were not regular churchgoers or Bible readers. Finally, I would not be considering how they read the whole Bible but five specific texts: 2 John, Proverbs 10:1-11, 2 Samuel 5:17-25, Matthew 18:21-35 and Psalm 88. These developments resulted in a refined research question which asks: how would a British man, who does not read the Bible or go to church, read five biblical texts? Chapter 3 now unpacks the designing of my research tools, along with recounting the fieldwork and data analysis which took place, but first it considers my place within this research.

⁶⁹ See Appendix G for a copy of the short description provided for this Psalm.

CHAPTER 3: Data Production - Methods and Fieldwork

Having highlighted the prompts for my research question and then traced its development and refinement, this chapter now recounts the research methods which I constructed and the fieldwork that was undertaken. I begin by considering my position within this research and some of the ways in which I have influenced it. In particular, I suggest that as a Christian, some people may assume that this research is really an attempt to evangelise and I outline three different areas where I demonstrate this not to be the case: my conduct, the research materials and the content of this thesis. Having located myself and acknowledged my role in this work, I then argue for a mixed method approach, utilising annotation, a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. This section ends by describing my use of biographical Entrance and Exit questionnaires and my use of a pilot study to refine these tools. The chapter then recounts the fieldwork, noting the importance of George, my gatekeeper, who not only made my entrance into the Chemical Plant possible, but also introduced me to some of the men. I then chart the effectiveness of snowball sampling with one group introducing me to another, so that after 10 months seven groups (20 men) had completed the project, and end by briefly describing my analysis of the data. This chapter therefore concludes the first half of my thesis, where the background to my project and the fieldwork is presented. The subsequent chapters then consider the findings from it. First however, in line with other qualitative Bible reading research (Malley, 2004; Bielo, 2009b; Rogers, 2013a & 2013b) I will consider my place and influence in this project.

Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

A reflexive approach to research assumes that the researcher is part of the research process, not an objective outsider peering in, as David Gray notes:

Reflexivity involves the realization that the researcher is not a neutral observer, and is implicated in the construction of knowledge. Far from being a disinterested bystander, the researcher is seen as someone whose observations are by their very nature, selective, and whose interpretations of results are partial. (2009, p. 498)

By acknowledging this, it becomes incumbent upon the researcher to reflect upon their thoughts, actions, feelings, ideologies, and presuppositions, in order to examine their

influence upon the research. Nicola Slee argues that this self-reflection should be viewed as a source of “empirical evidence” within the research matrix, evidence which “must be open to critical scrutiny no less than what is traditionally defined as relevant evidence” (2004, p. 51). In doing so a clearer understanding of the research process and accompanying results is gained, for the researcher’s influence is also accounted for (Mason, 2002, pp. 4-8; Simons, 2009, pp. 91-93).

Therefore, it should be assumed that I have influenced this research in ways that I am aware of and in ways that I am not. For example, following Sam Porter (2002) in regards to social enquiry, I am a critical realist, believing there to exist phenomena, such as social structures, which are general rather than specific in nature. Critical realism emerged in the 1970s (Sayer, 2000; Archer *et al.* 1998), and understands there to be a reality outside (or independent) of my knowledge base and consciousness, one which can be known (or experienced) but in a culturally conditioned way, thus making my conclusions in some way provisional. I would further add that “a certain capacity for critical self-distancing is actually part of the way we are bound up with the world” (Eagleton, 2000, p. 10). Therefore, with reference to my research, unlike someone who assumes a constructivist approach and so only refers to their “interpretation of the data” and not to “findings,”⁷⁰ I will refer to my “interpretation of the data” and my “findings,” both of which fit with critical realism. This then is one way in which I shape my research, and other examples could include the influence of my personality, interests and motivation.

The claim that I influence my research does not nullify its findings, but it does reinforce the particularity of them, for I am an integral part of what took place. In noting my influence within the research processes a more honest and balanced description of the research emerges, one which acknowledges the subjective aspect of this work. My aim is not to establish a claim of being “objective,” but to ensure that the research process is transparent, the coding and analysing accurate and the presentation of findings fair (Creswell, 2014, p. 201). This openness allows for greater scrutiny of my work by others, and should result in a detailed and trustworthy account.

⁷⁰ This is because a constructivist approach presupposes that all engagement with reality is interpreted and so it “rejects the idea that there is objective knowledge in some external reality for the researcher to retrieve mechanistically,” (Costantino, 2008, p. 118). Accordingly, nothing is ever “found,” rather a researcher can offer their interpretation of the data.

In light of this need for transparency, it has become common practice for the researcher to disclose their own sense of identity relevant to their research.⁷¹ In the introduction I briefly described myself, but a more thorough depiction is required. I am a 37 year old British male, who worked as a Physiotherapist prior to studying theology and beginning a PhD. I presently live in North West England with my wife and two children. Perhaps most significantly, I am a Christian and was brought up in a church-going, Bible-reading family. I have a particular interest in contextual Bible readings, possibly due to growing up in Latin America where my parents were missionaries. To that end, I affirm Stuart Murray's suggestion that in light of the declining influence of Christianity in Britain:

We may also find surprising new insights from reading Scripture with those in post-Christendom who have no church background and read the Bible without traditional assumptions and interpretations. (2004, p. 297)

Furthermore, as a Christian, I believe that God is outward looking and that Christians should be outward looking as well.⁷² Part of that outward-looking-ness could involve providing those who do not read the Bible with the opportunity to do so, in a meaningful setting and format. An awareness of how the Bible is read by those who do not normally read it may help to inform this. This was part of my motivation when I began to undertake this research, and as I will highlight conflicts with the ethical implications of the research itself.

Helen Simons suggests that the “fundamental ethical principle in research, whatever methodology you choose, is to ‘do no harm’” (2009, p. 96). She does not present this as a simple concept but goes on to document the various difficulties, grey areas and ethical dilemmas which can occur. My own research was accepted by the University's Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee and followed the ethical guidelines outlined by the British Sociological Association (2002). For instance, all the data collected was kept secure and confidential. The participants were told that any data particular to them would be anonymised prior to being included in a presentation, publication or thesis. Having completed

⁷¹ Nancy Miller notes that within feminist criticism it has become normal to self-identify in relation to the work being undertaken, she describes this as “the waltz of the ‘as a’s; the obligatory dance cards of representativity” (2013, p. 121). Anna Fisk (2014) points out that Miller's criticism is aimed at those who self-declare their position at the start of their work but then ignore it for the rest. In my case, I consider my influence upon the research in this chapter and then later in Chapter 6 where it is of particular significance.

⁷² Within Christian theology the phrase *Missio Dei* has been used to express the idea that God is outward looking. For a recent example and exploration of God as a missional God see Wright (2006).

the research though, 18 of the 20 men directly indicated that they did not want their details to be anonymised and so their personal details have been included in this thesis.

In light of my Christian identity however, it was important to demonstrate that this project was not evangelism in the guise of research. Within Britain, Christians have been accused of undertaking certain tasks or roles with the aim of proselytising. Gordon Lynch for instance, notes that there are many Christians involved in charity work, and in particular counselling (an area in which he worked). He comments that some people viewed this with suspicion suspecting “that counselling was being exploited by some Christians as a way of inflicting the gospel message on vulnerable and unsuspecting clients. In general, though, I didn’t find that to be the case” (2003, pp. 3-4). This demonstrates both the suspicion which some have towards a Christian’s motivation, but also that those fears may be unfounded.

As a church going, Bible reading, Christian, I anticipated that I would be viewed by the participants as an “outsider,” for I assumed most would identify as “not religious” (McCutcheon, 1999). Moreover, I also suspected that I would be treated with a degree of suspicion, due to the reputation Christians have for evangelising, as Lynch highlighted. Suspicion of field researchers is not uncommon (Agar, 1996, pp. 134-139; Pearson, 2002; Goldstein, 2002). In my case, I employed various strategies to demonstrate that this project was not concerned with proselytising, and by doing so hoped to gain the trust of my participants. These strategies involved my own conduct, the research materials and the final thesis. Importantly, although various techniques could be employed to demonstrate that there was no threat of me attempting to evangelise, as Chapter 6 recounts, nothing prevented the participants from assuming that I might.

The Researcher

In an attempt to both minimise my influence in the research process and show that the research was not concerned with evangelism I sought to limit the impact of my Christian identity upon the fieldwork in four ways. First, I was concerned that by identifying as a Christian my potential participants would assume that I was mainly interested in their conversion. Such an assumption would both shape the data to emerge, but may also result in men refusing to volunteer. Issues of access are not uncommon in fieldwork. Contrasting my own context, but echoing my experience, Nadège Mézié (2010) was unable to gain access to

an American evangelical missionary organisation in Haiti as she was not a Christian. Therefore she decided to pretend to convert to Christianity and in doing so found that access was granted. If possible however, deception in fieldwork should be kept to a minimum and I did not want to undertake covert research or use deception by claiming to be nonreligious myself (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 57). Furthermore, I lacked the time which others have had to build up trust with their participants, such as the three years Daniel Wolf spent with a Biker gang (Wolf, 1991). Therefore I decided that I would principally present myself as a researcher from a local University and not actively refer to my own religious identity whilst the men were completing the project. William Shaffir notes that:

Field research requires some measure of role-playing and acting. In order to be granted access to the research setting and to secure the cooperation of his or her hosts, the researcher learns to present a particular image of himself or herself. (1991, p. 77)

If the participants were interested and asked about my religious affiliation or motivation, I indicated that I would answer all their questions regarding my identity and motivation once they had completed the project. This limited disclosure addressed my concern that knowledge of my identity would put people off participating, but also upheld the rights of the participants. This compromise was one the men seemed to appreciate, for the majority of the groups I approached at the Chemical plant were willing to take part and most would also ask about my religious identity having completed the research. When asked, I usually provided a brief answer indicating that I am a religious person, do read the Bible and do go to Church. Typically the participants were content with that reply and the conversation ended.

Second, I continually reaffirmed that my role as the researcher was to listen and that the purpose of this project was to see how people read the five biblical texts.⁷³ I was not going to give the participants a score for how well they read the texts, nor was I going to impose my views of the texts upon them. More often than not I emphasized that I simply sought their thoughts and their opinions on these texts, valuing their honesty and willingness. So although most of the participants went on to express confusion, frustration, anger, bitterness,

⁷³ A phrase I used throughout the project was: “the only right answer is an honest answer.”

disagreement and disbelief towards the texts, these were views which I accepted and valued without challenge.

Third, I kept a reflexive journal throughout the fieldwork. This is a recognised method which is employed by researchers to chart and reflect on their role in the research (Gray, 2009, p. 499; Janesick, 2004, pp. 141-155). My field notes did not simply contain an account of what took place, but also my perceptions of how the participants responded to me and I to them. My hopes, fears, frustrations and other feelings were also documented, and the content of this journal would become one of the data sources which informed the thesis.

Finally, I abstained from answering any indirect questions which were raised about religion or the Bible. For example, during my interview with Zadok, a 59 year old utility technician who identified as “not at all religious,” he said:

I'd like to find out the, when we say the Bible is a collection of stories, but in it is a core piece and I need to know what that core piece is. Or I'd like somebody to tell me what that core piece is so I can read it.

I did not reply by suggesting that in my opinion the “core piece” of the Bible is the person Jesus, rather I acknowledged his comment with a nod, but said nothing and the conversation moved on.

There were two instances where I responded to a participant's question which could be argued was an attempt to evangelise. Andy G is a 49 year old mechanic, who identified as “moderately religious” because he is a Freemason. By completing the project he realised that he was unaware of much of the Bible's content, a book which he affirmed as “a guide to life.” Therefore towards the end of our interview, he asked what version of the Bible was best to read. I indicated that the Good News Bible was a popular version, written in simple language and so might be worth a try. The second occasion concerned Anthony, a 59 year old manager, who identified as a Christian and so “moderately religious”. He had enjoyed the project and indicated that during the course of the research he had accepted an invitation to attend a Bible reading course at the church his wife attended. In this instance I replied positively, saying such a course would seem to suit him. These two occasions are the only time when I consciously affirmed a participant's interest in the Bible or religion. In doing so however I do

not believe I stepped beyond the ethical boundaries of this project for both men initiated the question/comment, I answered or affirmed a decision which they had already made and did not pursue either matter further. Therefore as a Christian who was undertaking research I attempted to carry myself as a professional researcher, comfortably within the ethical parameters of this research.

The Research Materials

The research materials were not concerned with proselytising either, for instance as I have already recounted I avoided using texts which were concerned with conversion to Christianity. Furthermore, as a way of double checking for any potential bias within the research materials, I approached three different academics who acted as “critical friends.” The adoption of a critical friend (or three), enhances “my ability to be reflexive, transparent and to ensure my integrity” (Appleton, 2011, p. 1) and I would add, the integrity of my research materials as well. The use of a critical friend has been common practice in educational research (see for example Wachob, 2011) and has also been used in contextual Bible reading research (Cornwall, 2012). In my case, I specifically asked them to review the materials in light of my Christian identity. These scholars were familiar with small scale qualitative projects and identified with a variety of religions and none. In this way the research materials which I used (and are found in appendices C – I) were all reviewed with an eye to excising any apparent Christian bias. As it was, although there were various comments made regarding certain questions or phrases, none concerned the issue of proselytising.

Moreover, I decided not to give the participants an actual Bible to read from. There is the argument that the individual texts should be presented in an actual Bible, for my research question sought to consider how people read the Bible. In this way, many of the associations which the Bible has for the reader would more readily influence their reading of the text. As Brent Plate notes, “the way words appear to their readers will change the reader’s interaction, devotion, and interpretation” (2010, p. 67). He goes on to argue that the visible form of the words on the page, their layout and setting informs the reading (2010, pp. 70-81). However, in light of the possible accusation that this research was trying to put the Bible into the hands of those who do not regularly read it, it was decided to provide the participants with the texts printed on a single sheet of A4 paper so that they would never see or handle an actual Bible. I attempted to compensate for this by including a short description of the text’s literary position

within the Bible and its implied historical context in an introductory sheet preceding the text.⁷⁴ I am not alone in adopting this format, the Contextual Bible Study (CBS) method also advocates that the Bible passage is given to the readers on a single A4 sheet of paper. In their case it is done because it “encourages the group members to focus on the chosen passage rather than becoming side-tracked by other passages, related or unrelated” (Riches, 2010, p. 60). For CBS, this decision is made for practical reasons; in my case the ethical consideration took priority.

My research is also part sponsored by two Christian organisations: the Bible Society of England and Wales and a Christian trust fund. The two main conditions for receiving the grants were that I provide them with regular progress reports and a copy of the final thesis. The participants were informed about these two sponsors, verbally and in the Participant Information Sheet.⁷⁵ Although researchers, such as ethnographers, have found that relationships with sponsors can develop into a “patron-client” type of relationship with consequences for their fieldwork (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, pp. 58-60), this was not my experience. I had a minimal relationship with both organisations, who assumed a very hands-off approach and had no input into the design of the research, fieldwork, data analysis or final thesis.

The Thesis

Finally, those same ethical decisions have implications for this thesis, for what is produced cannot be an evangelism guide. For example, Andrew Curtis reflected upon the Bible readings of transsexual sex-workers in Australia and concludes by considering the implications of his research for Christian mission (2000). I will not be developing my thesis in this way because my project is not concerned with proselytising.⁷⁶ Instead I will utilize reader-response criticism and assume a more sociological approach. This is similar to James Bielo (2009b) and Brian Malley (2004) who also identified as Christians, and use reader-response criticism and social science to reflect on how fellow Christians read the Bible. Malley writes:

⁷⁴ See Appendix G for a copy of each descriptor provided for the five texts.

⁷⁵ See Appendix A for a copy of the Participant Information Sheet.

⁷⁶ Others who have undertaken qualitative or quantitative research amongst those who do not attend church and in light of their findings suggested ways in which the church can engage such people, include Hay and Hunt, (2000), Spencer (2003) and Stetzer *et al.* (2009). The North Yorkshire Dales Biblical Literacy Project also had a component which considered how those who do not attend church could be encouraged to read the Bible (“Let The Bible Live: Report of the North Yorkshire Dales Biblical Literacy Project, 2013).

I assume [...] that the authority and relevance of the Bible today are less a function of properties specific to the Bible than a consequence of the ways in which Bible believers encounter this ancient text. I do not deny either that the Bible has special properties or that these may in some measure account for its durability, but in this book I attempt to understand the longevity of the Bible as a function of the social and psychological elements of Bible-users' traditions. (2004, p. 10)

My decision to use reader-response criticism and assume a sociological approach should not be viewed as reductionistic. I am not claiming that my findings fully explain the readings which took place, but instead am presenting a reader-response perspective on them. There are other approaches from philosophy, theology, biblical studies, psychology and history which are also valid, indeed, because my work is interdisciplinary I will engage with some of these in a secondary way. However when I do, disciplines which have a Christian bias or use Christian categories, such as theology or biblical studies, will be engaged with cautiously.⁷⁷

This research faced various ethical challenges as every piece of research does. However, the concern that this project was an attempt to evangelise needed to be addressed, and to that end, my conduct in the field, my research methods, and this thesis all demonstrate that this was not the case.

Methods

Having put in place the foundations of my research, and located myself within it, my attention turned to consider the research tools which I would use. What follows presents the rationale behind the mixed method approach I employed and describes the individual research methods. Two other components of the research are also considered; the construction of two questionnaires and the piloting of these materials.

⁷⁷ For instance, the discipline of practical theology can have an acutely Christian agenda in so far as it concerns "Christian life and practice within the Church and in relation to wider society" (Ballard, & Pritchard, 2006, p. 1). John Swinton and Harriet Mowat are more explicit in suggesting that it is a missional discipline (2006, p. 25). Accordingly I avoid such missionally orientated theology.

A Mixed Method Approach

Some qualitative research examining real readers has used a single method, such as a written response (Bleich, 1978; Flynn, 1986; Pearce, 1997) or an interview (Holland, 1973; Radway, 1991; Hermes, 1995; Llewellyn, 2015). Many though have chosen to use a mixed method approach (Ammerman, 1987; Crapanzano, 2000; Malley, 2004; Macdonald, 2007; Le Grys, 2010; Jennings, 2011). They do so understanding that the data gained from one research tool can be reviewed in light of data from a second or third tool. For example, Lynn Neal examined women's readings of evangelical romance novels, and based her research upon a series of semi-structured interviews with 50 readers and 20 authors of such books. However she also analysed around 100 letters sent from readers to authors, and writes: "Together, the interviews and letters provided an array of views on inspirational romance novel reading, and the story of why some women read these novels emerged" (2006, p. 7). Therefore I too decided to adopt a mixed method approach.

The triangulation of different data sources used in this approach should result in the findings having a greater degree of validity. Furthermore, it is not only anticipated that the different methods would confirm a particular finding, but that each one would highlight different aspects of it and so a fuller picture would emerge (Flick, 2014). David Silverman (2010, pp. 63-64) warns that a mixed method approach must be kept simple, for it could overcomplicate and confuse the research process. Nonetheless, I chose three different research methods to consider how the men in my study read the biblical texts: annotation, a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. These three tools are suited to the individual nature of this research, with each participant expected to read the text for himself.

Annotation

My decision to include annotation borrows from Yvonne Sherwood who explored the annotations made upon a Bible displayed in the Modern Art Gallery in Glasgow (2012).⁷⁸ This Bible was part of an exhibition entitled *Sh[out]: Contemporary Art and Human Rights*, at which the public were invited to annotate any part of the biblical text they desired. The resulting annotations became part of the data which Sherwood used in her reflections on the reception of the Bible in that context.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ My thanks to Andrew Davies who alerted me to this study.

⁷⁹ In Chapter 4 I will engage with Sherwood's work in greater depth.

The usefulness of annotating a text has been examined within educational and literary studies (Hynd, Simpson & Chase, 1989; Walters, & Strode, 1991).⁸⁰ For instance, under the term “responsive teaching” Mark Pike, (2000; 2002) suggests the use of annotation when teaching literature to young people. Building on Louise Rosenblatt’s idea of a text acting as a “stimulus” (1994, p. 11), Pike argues that the correct starting point in a student’s engagement with a piece of literature is their initial response, an example of which could be their annotation of a text or associated journal entry. This is an approach he has advocated for Bible reading as well, suggesting that it increases the likelihood of the text being perceived as personally relevant (Pike, 2003). Similar approaches have been suggested as aids for learning or research: David Bleich (1985) argues for the use of a response statement by the reader, Lauren Leslie and JoAnne Caldwell (2009) suggest thinking out loud by the reader as they read, and Mike Jennings (2011) provided his participants with a “Bible Reading Comment form” to complete whilst reading

In my case the annotating of a text is a research method which adheres to the qualitative methodology assumed by this project for it allows a breadth of engagement with the text. It also fits with my research aim of considering the reading which takes place, and my research task which involves reading a short text. I therefore designed a “Manual”⁸¹ where the text the participants would read was printed, preceded by instructions for its possible annotation. The first page of the Manual explained and reinforced various aspects of the research task. In particular this page contained explicit instructions regarding the reading and annotating of the text:

1. Please read the passage through twice.
2. On the second reading underline words, phrases or concepts which stand out for any reason, and use the blank space on either side of the passage to write down why they stood out.
3. Finally, use that same space to write down any thoughts, feelings, ideas, images, memories, concerns or insights which you have about the passage. Don’t

⁸⁰ More recently in computer studies, the emergence of e-books has caused researchers to re-examine the reasons why readers annotate texts with a view to designing annotation software (Shipman *et al.* 2003; Marshall, & Brush, 2004).

⁸¹ See Appendix E and F for a copy of Manual 5.

forget, there are no “right” or “wrong” answers; your honest impressions are what count.

In line with the qualitative underpinnings of this research, the phrase “there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers” appeared twice on this introductory page. This attempted to reaffirm that the participants’ personal engagement with the text was what I valued, no matter the tone or substance. I also did not want to guide them to read in a particular way, so to communicate that any type of annotation was acceptable I used a list of seven nouns: “thoughts, feelings, ideas, images, memories, concerns or insights.” Of course a blank unannotated text was just as valid and valuable as one full of comments. My choice of language was borrowed from Mike Jennings’ Bible Reading Comment form, where he asked his participants to respond to the following:

What strikes you about these verses? Pay attention to any ideas, feelings, images, memories, or current concerns that may come to you as you read. Write them down. Highlight words or phrases in the verses that trigger your responses” (2011, p. 226)

On the second page of the Manual the passage was printed. The layout was similar to that used in the manuscript method of Bible study (Olesberg, 2012, pp. 14-18). It was located towards the middle of the page, with wide margins available for annotation and one-and-a-half line spacing allowing for clear underlining. The printed text excluded verse numbers and the layout was typically in the form of one large section of text with no divisions.⁸² Having completed the annotation exercise, the participant was invited to complete an accompanying questionnaire which made up the second half of the Manual.

Questionnaire

As well as using annotation, I also used questionnaires to explore how the men read the texts, a method other scholars have utilized. For example, Andrew Village (2007) used a questionnaire with over 200 questions to explore how Mark 9:14-29 was read by Anglican lay people. Susan Loman and Leslie Francis (2006) also used a questionnaire to investigate biblical literalism amongst UK school children. In their case, over 3,400 pupils were asked to

⁸² The two exceptions to this were Proverbs 10:1-11 where each proverb was set as a couplet and Psalm 88 which was divided into three sections guided by the *interlude* (Psalm 88:1-7, 8-10, 11-18).

read a series of Bible passages and indicate in the questionnaire how they viewed them. When questionnaires have been used in qualitative projects they have often been part of a mixed method approach along with interviewing and participant observation (Malley, 2004; Rogers, 2009), providing the researcher with a further avenue of enquiry. I decided to make use of a questionnaire principally because I anticipated that on some occasions the participants would not annotate the biblical text and I wanted an immediate opportunity to consider why this was the case. The inclusion of a questionnaire in the Manual ensured that this was so.⁸³

The questionnaire comprised of 15 open and closed questions. They were primarily formulated in light of the research question and attempted to consider it from a variety of angles, for instance asking: What, if anything, “jumped out at you” as you read through the passage?; Another example asked: Please write a one line summary of the passage. However, at this stage I was also working with three secondary research questions. First, in light of the trifold division of the world of the author, text and reader which is seen in contemporary CBS methods (Riches, 2010), and Village’s work (2007), I asked: Where do my readers locate the meaning of the text? Second, with Le Grys (2010) and Schneiders (1999) I considered what the transformative potential of these readings were. Finally, in light of the contextual nature of reading (Davies, 2013, pp. 4-7) what sources of influence can be noted in the reading? These secondary questions were of a more deductive nature and conflicted with the inductive approach I had assumed. However, they were helpful in constructing the questionnaire, and once the data was collated it was the emerging themes which I focused on rather than these secondary questions. The questionnaire concluded with the opportunity for the participant to note down any other thoughts or comments, reflecting standard questionnaire practice (Gillham, 2007, pp. 34-35).⁸⁴

Semi-structured Interview

The third research method I chose was a semi-structured interview. This is perhaps the most popular research tool used to explore real readers. At times it has been used as the sole

⁸³ See Appendix F for a copy of the questionnaire.

⁸⁴ There was one part of the questionnaire which caused two participants difficulty, and it involved a double negative, something that should ideally be avoided (Fink, 1995). Question 13 contained a five point Likert scale and asked the participant to indicate their response to the statement “This passage is **NOT** relevant in today’s world.” Two men indicated that they strongly disagreed with the statement, which conflicted with their other responses. I raised this with them during their interviews and it was clear that they had miss-answered this question.

research method (Radway 1991; Hermes, 1995; Llewellyn, 2015) whilst at others as part of a mixed method approach (Ammerman, 1987; Crapanzano, 2000; Malley, 2004; Neal, 2006; Bielo 2009b). A semi-structured interview allows the participant to speak to an issue using their words and for a conversation to develop between the researcher and the participant. Robert Weiss emphasises the value of interviewing by arguing that it is one of the contexts most suited to the sharing of personal thoughts, feelings and experiences (1994, pp. 1-2). As a research method, the semi-structured interview sits comfortably within a qualitative methodology and in light of the previous two methods involving some form of written response, it provided the opportunity for the participants to respond verbally.

Having read the five texts, annotating and completing the related questionnaires, each participant would be invited to discuss the texts in a one-to-one semi-structured interview.⁸⁵ The interview contained some questions which everyone was asked, for example, I always gave the participants a copy of each text, asking them, “What did you make of that one?” Other questions were specific to the participant and emerged in light of my analysis of their annotations and responses in the questionnaires. It was also in this setting that I could clarify answers and annotations which the participants had provided or raise some of the emerging themes related to their responses. This provided them with the opportunity to respond and if necessary clarify any misunderstanding on my part, which in turn further validated the findings (Creswell, 2014, pp. 201-202). As is standard interview practice I typically began by asking the participants to tell me a bit about themselves and concluded by offering them the opportunity to ask me any questions or add a further comment (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, pp. 128-129). The interviews were recorded using a digital recording device and once completed, transcribed. A set transcription protocol was followed and I emailed the participants a copy of the transcript with the invitation to contact me if they felt there were any errors or wanted certain excerpts kept from the thesis (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 119; Silverman, 2010), but no one responded.

Entrance and Exit Questionnaires

There were two other tasks I asked my participants to complete. First, in order to gain some background information about them, along with a sense of their religious affiliation and

⁸⁵ See Appendix I for an outline of the interview.

attitudes towards the Bible, I designed a two part Entrance Questionnaire.⁸⁶ The first part requested basic biographical data about the participant and their religious affiliation,⁸⁷ which was achieved by asking them how religious and spiritual they considered themselves to be.⁸⁸ Their past and present religious practice was also explored before considering their exposure to the Bible. These questions were developed in light of other surveys, in particular David Clines' (1997) two surveys in Sheffield, and the British Social Attitudes survey on religious identity (British Social Attitudes 28, 2010).

The second part of the Entrance Questionnaire contained 22 statements related to the Bible and were designed to reveal the participants' attitudes to and beliefs about the Bible. Five statements considered the Bible's content, five its role or impact upon society, and five dealt with the participant's attitude towards the Bible. These areas were most significant for my research and so five statements were dedicated to each. Three statements were also included which considered the issue of interpretation and three dealt with the Bible and other faiths. Using a five point Likert scale the participants had to indicate how strongly they (dis)agreed with each statement. Likert scales are recognised tools for measuring attitudes. Bram Oppenheim notes that they are not designed to yield subtle insights, rather they produce "reliable, rough ordering of people with regard to a particular attitude" (1992, p. 200). Mike Jennings, (2011, pp. 74-75) used a five point Likert scale to assess his Bible readers' views on church and the Bible. Christian Research (2011) also used a five point Likert scale to explore people's attitudes to the Bible. The issues they addressed were the Bible and society, the Bible and personal faith, the Bible and accessibility, the Bible and history, and the Bible's image. In my case the 22 statements were phrased positively and negatively, and placed randomly throughout the three tables which held them, as is considered best practice (Sapsford, 2007, p. 225). The information gleaned from these tables was important in providing a fairly clear, if rough, measure of the participants' attitudes towards and beliefs about the Bible, which were then clarified during the semi-structured interview.

⁸⁶ See Appendix C and D.

⁸⁷ The straightforward nature of the information I was seeking meant that a questionnaire was the preferred research method (Denscombe, 2007).

⁸⁸ There was little difference between the participant's religious and spiritual identity. Someone who identified as "not at all religious" would also typically identify as "not at all spiritual," an overlap explored by Nancy Ammerman, (2013). Moreover, the men predominantly spoke about "religion" and rarely "spirituality," because of this my thesis focuses on the participants' sense of religious identity. There were four exceptions to this, Sam, Ethan and Zadok all described themselves as "spiritual but not religious" and Andy G, a 49 year old mechanic, identified as "moderately religious" and "not at all spiritual" due to his active membership with the Freemasons.

The Entrance Questionnaire was undertaken at the start of the research, prior to reading any of the texts. At the end, having read all five passages but not before the semi-structured interview, the participants completed an Exit Questionnaire.⁸⁹ It contained the same 22 statements as the Entrance Questionnaire and comparing the results was one way of identifying any significant change in the readers' attitudes to or beliefs about the Bible. It also asked them directly whether or not they had been affected by reading the texts.

Pilot

Having thus designed my research methods I sought to pilot them. Such practice is a valuable part of the research design and is an opportunity not only to trial the newly constructed research tools, but also to test the wording of certain questions (Silverman, 2010, p. 197). I approached nine, local, male dominated workplaces before the staff at the tenth agreed to take part. I had only begun to explain to this group of grounds and gardening staff that I was a researcher looking for participants for a research project when the only female in the group indicated that she would volunteer. In light of the difficulty in getting people to participate I said that although the main study would focus solely on men, for the purposes of the pilot men and women would be accepted. Thus three people from a group of five took part, two men (Rob and Mark) and one woman (Emily). As anticipated all the research tasks were conducted during the participants' lunchtimes at which I provided them with lunch. The use of an incentive is one method of encouraging participant uptake, and is common when there is difficulty getting volunteers (Oppenheim, 1992, p. 104). In my case this was less of an incentive and more of a thank you, as the participants had agreed to volunteer prior to being told about the provision of lunch.

Aside from the inclusion of a woman, there were four main differences between the pilot study and the fieldwork. First, in the fieldwork the men indicated that lunch would not be required, so I took them cream cakes instead. Second, where I had initially chosen five texts in the order of 2 John, Proverbs 10:1-11, 2 Samuel 5:17-25, Matthew 18:21-35 and Psalm 88, following feedback from the pilot participants I reordered them so as to begin with a more accessible text. Thus the order given at the Chemical Industrial Plant was Proverbs 10:1-11, 2 Samuel 5:17-25, Matthew 18:21-35, Psalm 88 and 2 John. Third, I trialled different wordings of questions in the pilot study and was then able to gauge the participants' response to them.

⁸⁹ See Appendix H for a copy of the Exit Questionnaire.

That informed my decision as to which questions would be included in the main fieldwork. Finally, the interviews with the pilot study participants were longer as they also included questions regarding any changes they would suggest to the research materials or process. The data which was produced in the pilot study was not added to the data from the main fieldwork for that was neither the purpose of the pilot nor did it correspond to the case study nature of my research. Only after having undertaken the pilot study and reviewed all the material in light of it, did I turn to consider the actual fieldwork.

Fieldwork

In light of the difficulty getting participants for the pilot study, I expected the fieldwork to be no different. One technique which is commonly used by researchers to access a difficult field is the use of a gatekeeper (Burgess, 1991; Stewart, 2014). This is usually someone who can act as a go-between and facilitate the researcher's entry into a particular research field, or introduce them to potential participants. Accordingly, I approached two workplace chaplaincy organisations to see if they would be able to facilitate my entry into a male dominated workplace. One of them was Mission in the Economy (MITE) (<http://www.missionintheeconomy.com/>), which sought to be a faith presence in the economic communities of North West England. Importantly evangelism was not one of their aims, so they were less likely to see my own research as a proselytising opportunity.

MITE put me in contact with George, a member of one of their local groups. He was in his early sixties and had worked as the health and safety co-ordinator at a local Chemical Industrial Plant for 24 years. George was a Christian and so was sympathetic to my project. We met in the summer of 2012 at the Chemical Plant where he worked, and when I described the project to George, he said he was happy to act as a gatekeeper, believing the Plant to be a good site for my fieldwork. It had a large male dominated workforce who typically returned to their staffrooms and portacabins during their 40 minute lunchbreaks, so it could provide both the setting and the time for my project, if the men were willing to volunteer.

George was also part of a local initiative called *The Salt of the Earth Network* (<http://www.saltoftheearthnetwork.net/>). This was established by a local Bishop to facilitate discussion and action on the part of local industries and their communities. Typically they organised quarterly meetings at which issues like corporate social responsibility, fracking or

apprenticeships were discussed. This network was one known to the Chemical Plant and George suggested that my research would fit within its broad vision of encouraging partnerships across different agencies, industries and communities. Thus in a very loose way my project was adopted by this network. This had two practical implications. First, over the next few weeks George raised my project with a member of the senior management team at the Plant. He presented it as a piece of doctoral research which had links with the *Salt of the Earth Network*, a network known to the manager, who subsequently agreed to the fieldwork taking place. Second, with my agreement, once the fieldwork had been completed, the *Salt of the Earth Network* co-ordinated a feedback evening at the Chemical Industrial Plant where the participants and others were invited to hear the results.⁹⁰ This was the extent to which MITE and the *Salt of the Earth Network* played a role in the fieldwork. Their input was vital in providing me access to a suitable workplace, but it was a passing role.

Not only did George facilitate my entry into this site, he also took me through the induction process enabling me to visit the site unaccompanied and introduced me to two groups of potential participants. It became clear that George had a particular talent for stimulating people's interest in the uninteresting. Further, having worked on the site for 24 years, he had built up decades of good will with many workers. I was to benefit from this good will, for these two groups of men, most of who identified as "not at all religious," indicated that they would be willing to participate.

By the time the fieldwork started, in October 2012, George had retired. This meant that the fieldwork could take place free from any direct influence from him and dealt with the possibility that he might have used it as a chance to evangelise.⁹¹ George and I continued to meet throughout the fieldwork however, and I kept him updated on my progress. In order to maintain the participants' confidentiality and anonymity, George never asked any direct questions about them and the project was always discussed in general terms.

The first group of men began the project in October 2012. They were a group of welders who had lunch together in their portacabin and four out of that group of five took part. Over a period of two weeks these men read through the five texts and completed the various research

⁹⁰ Significantly, only one of the men came: Anthony. This perhaps indicates that although most of the men were willing to volunteer, ultimately they were not that interested in the project.

⁹¹ I do not think he would have as he appreciated the ethical boundaries of the project.

materials. Due to two of the participants falling ill it was a further two weeks before all the participants had been interviewed. This group were then able to recommend another small group and introduced me to them. Snowball sampling is an accepted and common sampling technique especially in settings which are unfamiliar to the researcher or difficult to access (Davies, 2007, p. 147, Denscombe, 2007, pp. 17-18).

I discovered that there were three components necessary to maximise the chance that a new group of men would agree to take part. First, a recognised member of staff who had completed the project needed to introduce me and vouch for it. Second, the new group should contain no more than three people, and finally, that I explain the project to them personally. If any one of these components was missing the probability that the men would volunteer reduced significantly. For instance, towards the end of the fieldwork I approached the manager who had earlier agreed to the fieldwork being carried out on the site. I asked him if I could contact the staff who worked within the main administrative/managerial block. He was happy for me to try to recruit from amongst the management, but suggested that he email all the managers on my behalf. As it was, only two out of a potential sixteen replied to indicate their willingness.

Thus when one group finished the project they were usually able to introduce me to a new group who were often willing to volunteer and so over a ten month period seven groups completed the project. In only one instance did a group decline to take part, and that was because they were due to move site later that week.⁹² The first was a group of welders, the second utility men, the third were a group of engineers and the fourth a group of scaffolders. The fifth group comprised mainly mechanics, the sixth another small group of scaffolders and the seventh a group of managers. Each group typically comprised of a small team who lunched together in their own cabin/office. The only exception to this was the managers who, having individual offices, undertook the research alone at their desks. My youngest participant was aged 22 (John) and the oldest was 62 (Derek). The 20 men had differing levels of education and socio-economic backgrounds; however all were born in Britain and described themselves as “white British.” None of them read the Bible, went to church or participated in any other religious activity on a regular basis. They either identified as having no religion or with the Christian faith. By the time the managers had completed the project it

⁹² This contrasts the difficulty I had establishing the pilot group.

was clear that the same themes were reappearing in the data. I had reached saturation point and it was unlikely more data would add to the findings (Davies, 2007, p. 149).

These different groups followed the pattern set out earlier in this chapter. That is, having been introduced by another worker who had recently completed the project I presented it to them verbally and provided them with the Participant Information Sheet. A few days later I returned and answered any questions which had arisen, before inquiring if anyone was willing to volunteer. Those who did then signed the Consent form and we arranged a schedule for completing the various questionnaires and Manuals. It usually took two weeks for the men to complete all of this before I then analysed their data and arranged to meet them for a one-to-one semi-structured interview.

My description thus far of the research task does not do justice to the lived experience of undertaking this research; the reality was more convoluted and at times frustrating. Much in the same way as the researcher should identify themselves and their influence on the project, so too the difficulties and challenges must be acknowledged for they are also part of the research journey. Various issues cropped up throughout the fieldwork which resulted in it taking significantly longer than I anticipated. There was a week when the entire Plant closed down for essential maintenance and various holiday periods when the level of staff was reduced. At times the demands of work were such that the men were not able to meet at the hour they had indicated, and on other occasions some participants had periods of absence due to ill health. Sometimes when a group member was not present to complete the required research task they would offer to do so later that day or at home that evening. I agreed to this and it appeared to make no difference to the way they read the five texts. Unfortunately on two occasions I provided the wrong materials to two participants, thankfully the problem was resolved the following day when the issue came to light and I was able to give them the correct materials. Two participants withdrew from the project, one due to an accident which prevented him from returning to work, and the other out of choice. Therefore an eighth group started but did not complete the project. In total the fieldwork lasted 10 months.

Analysis

The data produced in the fieldwork required analysing. Following Martyn Denscombe (2007, pp. 287-288) I viewed my data analysis and interpretation as part of one process, and by

using a thematic approach I set out to “capture the dominant themes” present in the data (Franzosi, 2004, p. 550). Thematic analysis is similar to Grounded Theory, in that they both allow the data to shape the analysis. However, it does not require the concurrent collection and analysis of data which Grounded Theory does (Ezzy, 2002, p. 87).

Two main layers of analysis would take place. The first was at the individual level, for once a participant had engaged with all five texts and completed the associated questionnaires, I analysed their data. This involved coding the various subjects, issues, ideas, comments which were raised and placing them in larger categories, which led to the identification of the main themes. This information allowed me to tailor the semi-structured interview to the participant’s own readings. I undertook a subsequent wave of analysis once the interview had been transcribed, for only at this stage could the triangulation of the three data sources be done. Having completed this, I produced a one page summary of the participant’s reading of the five texts.

The second layer of analysis was corporate and involved immersing myself for a series of weeks in all the data produced by the participants. During this time I reviewed each piece, once again coding, categorizing, and identifying the major themes. Having undertaken this first wave of corporate analysis a second wave followed, one which focused on the main themes identified and involved seeking further data related to them which affirmed, challenged or nuanced them. Finally a third wave of analysis took place concentrating on any minor themes in the data or outlying categories to which I had not given due consideration. These layers and waves of analysis, reflect the attention to detail required by qualitative data analysis (Boulton & Hammersley, 2006, pp. 250-256; Bazeley, 2013). In total 20 interview transcripts (25 to 50 minutes long), 140 questionnaires (100 related to the five texts and 40 from the Entrance and Exit questionnaires) and 69 annotated texts were analysed from the fieldwork.

Conclusion

In this way I attempted to answer my research question, by designing and implementing a qualitative case study. This chapter has described the construction of my research tools and the undertaking of my fieldwork. I began by locating myself with reference to my work and noting some of the ways in which I influenced its shape. Particularly as a Christian, I had to

demonstrate that my project was not evangelism in the guise of research. I did this by highlighting how I carried myself in the field, my construction of the research materials and the tone of this thesis. Having addressed this ethical issue, I returned to my research question and argued for the use of a mixed method approach which comprised annotation, questionnaire, and interview. I then recounted how I used a pilot study to further refine the tools, before tracing the fieldwork which I undertook. I noted the usefulness of George, my gatekeeper, and the snowball sampling technique which resulted in seven groups taking part. This chapter then concluded by outlining the various waves of analysis which took place, both for each individual participant and for the group as a whole.

Up to this point in the thesis I have traced the prompts, development and refinement of my research question along with the construction of my research methods and implementing of the fieldwork. All of which makes up the first half of my thesis. The second half now turns to consider the main findings from this case study. What follows builds upon the thematic analysis which took place, for the findings are explored in a similar thematic fashion.

PART TWO

CHAPTER 4: Reader Shaped Readings – Foundation and Experience

The second half of this thesis will argue that these readers' relationships with the five biblical texts shaped their readings of those texts. There are three strands to this argument and they make up the subsequent four chapters. The first strand concerns the theoretical foundation which I build upon, and the first part of this chapter addresses this by unpacking Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading (1995; 1994; 2005). In particular, two components of her relational view of reading are highlighted, for they most closely account for the findings from my case study. First, that the reader and the text co-exist in a dynamic system indicating that they have a relationship of some kind prior to coming together in the act of reading. Second, that all that the reader is in relation to the text shapes their reading of that text, with certain aspects of that relationship having a greater influence on the reading which takes place.

The second strand of my argument is made up of four examples which demonstrate the reality of the central claim theorized in the first strand. Each example explores a different aspect of the reader's relationship with the texts and its subsequent influence upon the readings. Accordingly, the second half of this chapter examines the impact of the reader's prior religious experiences, Chapter 5 considers the influence of the reader's sense of religious identity and then their attitudes towards the Bible, and Chapter 6 investigates the significance of the reader's beliefs about the Bible.

Chapter 7 continues to explore the relational nature of these readings, and here a series of unexpected readings are studied. These were readings which were shaped by, but did not conform to, the reader's relationship with the text. They form the third strand of my argument by demonstrating the capacity of a text to lead a reader into an atypical reading. In this way then the relational nature of these readings is argued, one involving both the reader and the text.

This present chapter begins by introducing Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading. I describe the central tenets of her reader-response theory and in doing so highlight two particular ways in which this theory resonates with the findings of my own study. These are that the reader and the text exist within a dynamic system, and that the reader brings all that they are to a text with certain aspects of the reader informing the reading more than

others. The transactional theory has its limitations and some of these are also presented, ultimately however I contend that this theory describes the readings which took place at the Chemical Industrial Plant, something the remainder of the thesis will demonstrate.

I then move to the first example of how my readers' relationships with the five biblical texts shaped their reading. Two men are presented who were particularly clear illustrations of the influence of a reader's prior religious experiences upon their readings. Dave is a 44 year old welder who grew up attending church with his family although he now identifies as "not at all religious." In his case, painful childhood experiences related to church would result in a "bitter" reading of the texts. Something similar happened when members of the public annotated a Bible in Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art, and the parallels between these two cases are explored in light of insights from social psychology. Gary is a 48 year old utility technician who also identified as "not at all religious," and like Dave he also found that his prior experiences of religion significantly informed his reading of the five texts. In his case it resulted in a lack of engagement, which is explored in light of Matthew Engelke's ethnographic study of the Friday Masowe weChishanu Christians in Zimbabwe who reject the Bible (2007). This chapter therefore theorizes the relational nature of the readings which took place and provides the first working example of this theory in action.

The Foundation - A Transactional Theory of Reading

Louise Rosenblatt was an American educationalist and literary scholar, who is recognised as one of the early and significant voices within reader-response criticism (Tompkins, 1980, p. x; Roen & Karolindes, 2005). Her transactional theory has been widely used by teachers in North America (Sloan, 2002), and has been applied to a variety of other interpretive contexts, including music (Cardany, 2014), advertising (Begoray, Higgins, Harrison and Collins-Emery, 2013), Bible reading practices (Pike, 2003; Jennings, 2011) and biblical interpretation (Davies, 2000). It has been adapted to include a vocal and written component (Dugan, 1997) and merged with activity theory (Beach, 2000). Wayne Booth in his Foreword to the fifth edition of her work *Literature as Exploration* (1995 [1938]) writes:

Has she been influential? Immensely so: how many other critical works first published in the late thirties have extended themselves, like this one, to five

editions, proving themselves relevant to decade after decade of critical and pedagogical revolution? (p. vii).

It is questionable whether her influence is as great in the field of biblical studies as it is in the literary and pedagogical fields, for in biblical studies Stanley Fish (1980) and Wolfgang Iser (1974) are more commonly cited (Resseguie, 1984; Moore, 1986; Porter, 1990; McKnight, 1993; Barton, 2002; Schwáb, 2003). Nonetheless, because foundational to the transactional theory is an understanding that every reader's relationship with the text shapes their subsequent reading, it is Rosenblatt's transactional theory which most closely correlates and expounds the readings which took place at the Chemical Industrial Plant.

At the beginning of *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (1994 [1978]) Rosenblatt notes that historically the focus of scholars has been upon the author or the text, and "the reader has tended to remain in shadow" (p. 1). This is not a unique observation (Eagleton 1996; Littau, 2006) and is one which George Aichele and others have sought to address with reference to the Bible (1995). In their case they consider the Bible through a variety of reading methods, such as reader-response or ideological criticism, which explicitly or implicitly elevate the reader to a prominent position. Rosenblatt reflected on how actual readers (students) engaged with texts, theorizing the relationship which occurs between the reader and the text in the act of reading, something she calls the transactional theory of reading. By focusing on the reader/text transaction, she brings the reader out from the shadow to assume their place alongside the author and the text.

Rosenblatt builds on the idea of "transaction" promoted by John Dewey and Arthur Bentley in *Knowing and the Known* (1949), where they argue there is no definitive divide between the knower, the knowing and the known, rather they are all interconnected. They were challenging the positivist paradigm that the subject and object were distinct and separate, positing in its place that both are part of the same matrix and so influence each other. This view is commonly held by social scientists (Gray, 2009, pp. 498-499) and is an integral part of disciplines such as ethnography where the researcher and the researched are not viewed as separate entities but part of the same research matrix (Denzin, 1997; Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 47). Ecology is another discipline where the inter-relatedness of the subject and object is indispensable, here animal, plant and sea life are all understood to be part of one dynamic system (Beeby & Brennan, 2004; Rosenblatt, 2005, p. xvii).

By applying this to reading, Rosenblatt argues that the reader and the text are not unconnected entities which come together in the reading of a text and then move on potentially unaffected by the reading (much like two snooker balls bouncing off each other) (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 40). Rather, reading is a relational activity involving two parties, the reader and the text, who have a reciprocal relationship, existing within the same matrix and influencing each other as they come together, much as a river and a river bank do (Dillard, 1982). Therefore, with regards to Bible reading, what the following chapters will show is the existence of a relationship which all my participants had with the biblical texts. These men were part of a dynamic system, a matrix, within which the five texts also existed and as they were brought together the nature and contours of the relationship became clear. This relationship was not a direct one because none of the men indicated that they were familiar with the texts. It was indirect for the five texts were associated with the Bible and wider Christianity,⁹³ subjects which the participants had a direct relationship with, having previously encountered both.

This relational view of reading is further developed by Rosenblatt who posits that in the act of reading itself, both parties continue to influence each other:

Reading is a constructive, selective process over time in a particular context. The relation between reader and signs on the page proceeds in a to-and-fro spiral, in which each is continually being affected by what the other has contributed [...] As the text unrolls before the reader's eyes, the meaning made of the early words influences what comes to mind and is selective for the succeeding signs. But if these do not fit in with the meaning developed thus far, the reader may revise it to assimilate the new words or may start all over again with different expectations. (1995, pp. 26-27)

According to Rosenblatt then, reading is not made up of the text asserting its meaning upon the reader, nor the reader extracting or creating a meaning out of the text. Instead meaning emerges from the toing-and-froing which occurs in the reader/text relationship. It is a “two-

⁹³ Strictly speaking, no one ever encounters Christianity but they do meet Christians, attend Christian services and are exposed to traditions, rituals and festivals associated with the Christian faith.

way, reciprocal relation” (p. 27) and so “meaning is not ‘in’ the text or ‘in’ the reader. Both reader and text are essential to the transactional process of making meaning” (p. 27).

By “reader,” Rosenblatt does not focus upon one particular part of an individual, such as their psychological profile (Holland, 2011), personality (Francis, 2013), ideological stance (Rowland, 2006) or particular social location (Segovia & Tolbert, 1995a, 1995b). Instead, she is referring to the multitude of things which make up an individual, such as their attitudes, experiences, beliefs, assumptions, feelings, personality and expectations. These the reader brings to the text, along with “many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination [which] determine his [sic] inter-fusion with the peculiar contribution of the text” (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 30).

I would further add that for Rosenblatt there are three elements which she highlights as shaping the reader and so the reading. First, there is the reader’s personal association or connection with the text, which would include their attitudes, expectations or memories related to the text. Second, there are wider aspects of the reader which also contribute to the reader/text relationship, such as the reader’s personality, temperament or present preoccupation. Third, the socio-physical context of the reading is also understood to play a role within this relationship, shaping the reading which takes place (Rosenblatt 1995, p. 30; 1994, p. 81). This plethora of influences shape the reader’s approach to the text and the reading act itself (2005, p. 8). In this way, Rosenblatt’s transactional theory contends that the reader brings all that they are to the text, in a particular socio-physical context, all of which shapes the reading.

In this thesis however, I use the term “the reader’s relationship with a text” to specifically refer to the reader’s direct associations with the text, this would include their attitudes, experiences, beliefs, memories and assumptions with reference to the text. This is because the readings which occurred at the Chemical Plant revealed the significant influence of these readerly associations upon those readings. This limited definition of a reader’s relationship with a text is also seen in Andrew Village’s work:

A person’s relationship to a sacred text such as the Bible encompasses a number of different aspects. Among these are their attitude towards the Bible, their beliefs about the Bible and their use of the Bible. It would not be surprising if these were

related to each other: people who have negative attitudes towards the Bible are unlikely to believe that it has any divinely ordained authority, and probably read it seldom if ever. Those who believe it to be the word of god will presumably have a positive attitude to it and will be more likely to read it. This broad generalization hides a more complex picture in which attitudes, beliefs and practices are distinct aspects of a holistic relationship to scripture. (Village, 2007, p. 29)

Rosenblatt understands a “text” to be “a set of marks or squiggles on a page. These become a sequence of *signs* as they meet the eyes of a reader” (2005, p. x, emphasis in original); signs which can be interpreted. The transactional theory contends that the text can play two particular roles in any reading. First, it can act to stir-up (2005, p. xxv), evoke (2005, p. 9) and stimulate the reader (1995, p. 31). In other words, it provides something specific to which the reader responds. However, it is not limited to the role of stimulus, for it also has the potential to guide (1995, p. 265), regulate (1994, p. 11) and lead (1994, p. 11) the reader in the construction of meaning.

The transactional theory argues that as the reader comes to a text “some expectation, some tentative feeling, idea, or purpose, no matter how vague at first, starts the reading process,” (2005, p. 8). Using William James’ (1981 [1890]) concept of “selective attention,” Rosenblatt argues that particular associations, such as thoughts, feelings or experiences, will be pushed into the centre of the reader’s attention, whilst others fall into the background (2005, p. xxiv). These initial responses are chosen from the multitude of others because the reader understands them to be the most relevant for this particular act of reading (p. 6). In other words, certain aspects of the reader’s relationship with the text will be considered more significant to the reading than others, and so will play a more dominant role in the reading which takes place. In particular, Rosenblatt contends that every reader places themselves somewhere on an efferent/aesthetic spectrum as they anticipate reading a text. If the reader understands that the text should be read for information, as one would a train ticket, then they read from the efferent end of the spectrum. Whereas, if they believe it should be read with reference to the feelings, images and thoughts which it stirs up, as one would a poem, then they would read from the aesthetic end of the spectrum (2005, pp. 10-14). Such a broad view of the reader and all that they bring to the text is foundational to the transactional theory and my use of it.

Once someone has begun to read, they and the text “are involved in a complex, nonlinear, recursive, self-correcting transaction,” (2005, p. 9) as they to and fro, acting and being acted upon. Rosenblatt is not as prescriptive as Wolfgang Iser who describes the reader as following the “flow” of a text, anticipating the subsequent sentences and filling in the gaps where that flow is interrupted (Iser, 1974, p. 280). Her broad view of a reader understands that they bring all that they are to the text and in the unique dynamic interchange which takes place meaning emerges. In Iser’s case, the textual gaps act as a stimulus and by filling in those gaps the text takes on greater significance for the reader (1989, pp. 33-34). Rosenblatt also understands that the text acts as a stimulus but this is not limited to textual gaps rather every sign on the page is a stimulus. In this way the reader and the text’s toing and froing produces meaning and significance.

The transactional theory is not without its limitations or critics (Connell, 2008). For instance, it acknowledges the influence of other factors in any reading, including the context or “socio-physical” reading site (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 78). However unlike contextual Bible reading approaches such as CBS (Riches, 2010), it does not major on this influence. This is highlighted by Richard Beach (2000) who compensates for it by incorporating activity theory into the transactional model. In doing so he suggests that every reader’s transaction with a text is situated within a wider socio-physical context, and it is this context which influences the reader’s motivation, sense of identity and interest in the text.

David Bleich (1980) argues against the transactional theory’s assumption that texts have agency, in that they can lead a reader, and the resulting limitation of meaning which ensues. This is one of the distinctions between Rosenblatt’s theory and that of Stanley Fish, who proposes that there is no pre-existing text rather all texts are constructed in the mind of the reader. He argues that the reason two or more readers can reach a similar conclusion on the same text is because they belong to the same interpretive community, sharing the same interpretive strategy, and so any interpretation is limited by the reader’s interpretive community (Fish, 1976; 1980). Rosenblatt acknowledges that any meaning is possible, but argues that valid meanings are limited by the text rather than the interpretive community. In her theory there is a place for the reading community (the example she gives is of a college class) in correcting or nuancing the meaning which has been proposed (2005, p. 28). However, her focus is on the text and its role in restricting the range of possible meanings, not the interpretive community. In line with Gadamer (1979) and Iser (1980, p. 65) she also

argues that the text provides the potential for the reading transaction to produce new understandings outwith the reader's interpretive community (1995, p. 25).

Similarly where a historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation would concentrate on the authorial intent and *Sitz im Leben* of the text (Fitzmyer, 2008; Vanhoozer, 1998), Rosenblatt acknowledges the role of the probable authorial intent and background to the text in guiding the reader's understanding (2005, xxiii), but does not major on this either. The lack of attention to these historical aspects results in a theory which falls short of what some consider a balanced model of interpretation (Gorman, 2009; Osborne, 2006; Tate, 1997). However, Rosenblatt is aware of the historical legacy which has prioritised the author and the text over the reader and she sought to redress this imbalance by focusing on the reader (1994, pp. 1-5). Further, as an educationalist her purpose was to provide a theoretical foundation for the teaching of literacy not the construction of an interpretive model, which is, I suspect, another reason for her focus on the reader/text relationship.

This focus corresponds to my research enquiry as to how men would read five biblical texts. My interpretation of the data indicated that my readers were bringing to the texts a plethora of different experiences, identities, attitudes and beliefs. All of these associations were interlinked, often reinforcing each other but at other times pulling the reader in different directions. In accord with the transactional theory of reading, ultimately certain aspects of the reader's relationship with the biblical texts played a more significant role than others (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. xxiv) and these are the focus of the proceeding chapters.

In doing so, I will present these aspects as individual findings from my case study. However, such an approach does stand against the tone of the transactional theory, for Rosenblatt's emphasis is on the interconnectedness of all the components which make up a reader's relationship with a text. Reading is a "complex network or circuit of interrelationships, with reciprocal interplay," she writes (2005, p. 43). She does believe individual elements which make up the reader/text relationship can be identified (2005, p. 42), but her emphasis is on the holistic nature of the relationship.

Mike Jennings adheres to this interconnected view of reading when presenting the findings from his doctoral research (2011). He charts the way his reader's (Simon) anxiety about the legitimacy of his Christian faith and the restorationist theology he adhered to intertwined

shaping Simon's subsequent Bible engagement (2011, p. 157). However, in doing this Jennings only focused upon one reader out of his group of nine participants, and the other eight played a minor role in his thesis. In my case, I will present four different aspects of my participants' relationships with the five biblical texts which significantly shaped their readings. These are the participants' prior religious experience, sense of religious identity, attitude towards the texts, and beliefs about the Bible. Each of these aspects will be presented individually as standalone examples of the relational nature of these reading encounters. In presenting each aspect I will typically provide a limited number of readers, two or more, to demonstrate the influence of that readerly aspect. This approach demonstrates the impact of different readerly influences but at the cost of not fully addressing the inter-related nature of these readings.

The first half of this chapter has provided the foundation and first strand of my central argument. Rosenblatt theorized that readers and texts co-exist, in my case I will demonstrate that my participants already had some sort of relationship with the texts, one mediated through their connection with the Bible and Christianity. Therefore, because a reader's relationship with a text shapes their reading of it, the exact nature and flavour of that relationship would become clear as they read the five texts. The second strand now considers four different aspects of the reader's relationship with the five texts, and the remainder of this chapter will consider the first of these, the role of my participants' prior religious experiences in shaping their reading of the five biblical texts.

The Influence of the Readers' Experiences

Dave's "Bitter" Readings

Dave is the leader of a small group of welders at the Chemical Plant and someone of whom other staff spoke highly. I once heard a manager comment that Dave "could build anything out of metal." For his part, Dave did not particularly enjoy his job, but he did appear to enjoy the banter and camaraderie with the rest of the welders. It had been years since Dave had read a Bible or heard one being read. He had no interest in religion and identified as "not at all religious." During his childhood however Dave, along with the rest of his family, regularly attended a number of evangelical churches. In Dave's case, the hypocrisy which he encountered resulted in his rejection of Christianity. He describes it in this way:

Around 15, 16, I became aware of a hell of a lot of hypocrisy, because as I was turning into an adult I was seeing these people for what they really were. One face was what they were on a Sunday and the other face was what I could see they were behind closed doors and away from the Church. And I didn't like, without, without exception it was everybody that was involved in that religion.

When asked to read the five biblical texts, Dave read them sceptically. By this I mean, having read an entire text, he focused on aspects of it with which he disagreed. A sceptical reader may agree with large sections of a text, however when asked about the text in general, they principally express their disagreement with it, providing evidence from the sections they object to. In this way they concentrate on the parts they reject and downplay those they accept. As Chapter 7 will demonstrate, the specific content which the reader disagrees with varies according to the reader and the text, but they include a texts absolutist or bullying tone, its ethics, its lack of workability, its irrelevance, its contradictions or its inaccuracies. The reasons for reading in this way are explored in part in the following chapters. With reference to Dave, his comments, annotations and reflections nearly always revolved around ways in which the texts were wrong, immoral, unworkable or intolerant. To read in this way contrasts an accepting reading. This is where the reader focuses on parts of the text with which they agree making little or no comment on anything they disagree with, (as is seen in Anthony's engagement with these texts which is explored in Chapter 5).

None of the participants claimed to be reading "sceptically" or "acceptingly" I chose these terms as they broadly described how the texts were handled. In using these labels I disregarded others which are employed within academia. Some focus on the identity of the reader, such as "confessional" and "non-confessional" (Davies, 2004), but this emphasizes the reader rather than the reading event. Others, such as "reading against the grain" or "resisting readers" do not fully describe what is taking place, as I will later show. I did consider using a label such as "suspicion" or a "hermeneutics of suspicion." However, this term, once used positively by Paul Ricoeur (1981) concerning human knowledge has been presented as something in opposition to religious faith by others, for instance Miroslav Volf's uses the pairing "hermeneutics of respect or suspicion" (2010). Due to the diversity noted above I decided to make use of a pairing which, to the best of my knowledge, has not been used in the context of Bible reading before. This enables me to use and define the terms which I believed best describe what took place.

Dave's annotations on Proverbs 10:1-11 are a good example of a sceptical reading (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Dave's Annotations on Proverbs 10:1-11

A wise child brings joy to a father;
a foolish child brings grief to a mother. *LOVE IT*

Tainted wealth has no lasting value,
but right living can save your life. *WHAT ABOUT THE CHURCHES WEALTH BORN FROM POVERTY OF OTHERS*

The Lord will not let the godly go hungry,
but he refuses to satisfy the craving of the wicked. *RUSSISM*

Lazy people are soon poor;
hard workers get rich. *WRONG*

A wise youth harvests in the summer,
but one who sleeps during harvest is a disgrace.

The godly are showered with blessings;
the words of the wicked conceal violent intentions.

We have happy memories of the godly,
but the name of a wicked person rots away.

The wise are glad to be instructed,
but babbling fools fall flat on their faces. *SKILL*

People with integrity walk safely,
but those who follow crooked paths will slip and fall. *PEOPLE WITH HIGH VIS VESTS WALK SAFER*

People who wink at wrong cause trouble,
but a bold reproof promotes peace.

The words of the godly are a life-giving fountain;
the words of the wicked conceal violent intentions

His six comments all focus on parts of the text with which he disagrees. At times this is expressed directly, for example describing as “wrong” the proverb: “Lazy people are soon poor; hard workers get rich;” and at other times it is expressed indirectly, using humour or a more mocking tone, for example writing “love it” beside the first proverb. All of Dave’s subsequent annotations on the other texts would also focus exclusively on aspects of the text with which he disagreed.

In the related questionnaires a similar pattern was seen, for again Dave’s comments singularly concerned aspects of the texts he found objectionable. For example, the introductory question asked: What, if anything, “jumped out at you” as you read through the passage?

For Proverbs 10:1-11 Dave wrote:

“Some out of date and go completely against modern capitalist views.”

For 2 Samuel 5:17-25 he wrote:

“How their God encouraged violence.”

For Matthew 18:21-35 he wrote:

“Constant use of violent behaviour from God.”

For Psalm 88 he wrote:

“Cruel and violent God. Tortures people if he doesn’t get his own way.”

And for 2 John he wrote:

“This is John actively telling his Christian friends to behave antisemitic [sic].”

This pattern continued in our interview, for once again Dave spoke about the texts disparagingly.⁹⁴ His comparison of 2 Samuel 5:17-25 with “a Brothers Grimm book” illustrates and summarizes his sceptical engagement and subsequent reject of these five texts.

⁹⁴ See Appendix J for a full transcript of this interview highlighting the predominantly sceptical nature of Dave’s readings and exerts I quote.

When it's [Grimm's fairy tales] on about wolves biting babies heads off and, and in a way the Bible's the same. It's not, it's not real and it's lost its shock value now because of television and modern. At one point if you'd have read that [2 Samuel 5:17-25], I don't know, not so much to me, but probably 100 years ago, if you'd have read that to a child six, seven years old you'd actually put the bejesus up them. You'd scare the hell out of them, and it would be a God of impending doom, "if you don't do as you are told and everything else." It would you know, it's a fantasy world isn't it.

Dave was one of the few participants to use emotional language when writing or talking about the texts. During our interview I asked him if any one text stood out, and he replied:

Dave: Yeh, the last one, the last one negatively, it riles me [referring to 2 John].

David: Aye OK, you'd described, you said you felt "angry," was one of your comments about it [quoting Dave's answer to question six in the related questionnaire].⁹⁵

Dave: Because it's like, it's like starting a religion based on declaring war on another religion. And I don't get it.

I asked Dave if he had any thoughts as to why he had read all the texts so sceptically and he directly linked his reading of these texts to his past experiences:

Probably because I, of what I've, the people I've met, my upbringing and the journey of my life. Religion is attached to a lot of negativity, because of the people, not because of the Bible or. It makes, it just makes you look on the bad side of things really, I mean I could read it and pick out deliberately nice pieces but generally speaking, everybody I've ever known has used the Bible as an instrument to get their message across. And it's not the Bible's message, it is an interpretation of the Bible to get their message, and that's what I don't like.

⁹⁵ Question six in the questionnaire asked: What if anything was your "gut reaction" to this passage? I.e. how did it make you feel? (See appendix F). Few men answered this question by commenting on their feelings, but those that did often expressed feelings of anger, frustration, and disbelief.

Dave's direct linking of his childhood religious experiences with his sceptical reading of the five texts is very helpful because it is not easily seen in the annotations or textual comments themselves, for he did not explicitly connect certain texts or ideas to his childhood experiences. Dave would go on to describe himself as feeling "bitter" towards religion, a sentiment he again linked both to his childhood experiences and his reading of the five biblical texts. The Bible is the sacred text of Christianity, and so it and the Christian faith are intertwined (Aichele, 2001, p. 218). It is therefore no surprise that Dave would treat the five extracts from the Bible with antagonism in light of his feelings towards wider Christianity. The weight of his bitterness or negativity is emphasized by the fact that these painful experiences occurred at least 30 years ago and yet shaped these recent readings.

Dave's negative experiences of Christianity resulted in him identifying as "not at all religious," and expressing the hurt which he felt through the way he read the texts. His were readings primarily concentrating on aspects of the texts with which he disagreed. Dave's reading of the five biblical texts is understandable in light of his experiences and it is not unique. In different ways, Bob, Stewart, Matty, Andy G, Derek, and Gary would all link their prior religious experiences to their readings of the texts.

Profaning a Bible at the Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA)

Outside of this case study such a phenomenon has been noted by others as well. For example, in 2009, the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow staged an exhibition *Sh[out]: Contemporary Art and Human Rights*. This was a major exhibition on the theme of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex human rights (Sandell, Dodd & Jones, 2010). Jane Clarke the minister of the Metropolitan Community Church in Glasgow presented a Bible at it and an open invitation: "If you feel you have been excluded from the Bible, please write your way back into it" (Sherwood, 2012, pp. 9-10).

Yvonne Sherwood (2012, pp. 9-72) recounts how the content of the annotations which followed caused a public outcry, eventually leading to the Bible being placed in a Perspex box, preventing the public from further annotation.⁹⁶ Some of the annotations had a comical element, and Sherwood recounts how "The prophet Obadiah gained the jolly supplement

⁹⁶ The public were then given access to a blank book where they could write their comments.

‘Obladee, Obladah’” (p. 13). Other comments though appear to echo something of the hurt and bitterness which Dave expressed: “Please burn after reading. Preferably before;” “I wish this book didn’t exist;” “I am bi, female and proud, I want no God who is disappointed in this;” and “Holy figures hide behind their religion to hide who they are. Once you have been raped by a priest, maybe you understand, as I have” (pp. 10-12).

In this public setting, the British public were taking the opportunity to comment on the Bible. They were not reading any specific text and responding to it as my participants were, but they were using a sanctioned setting to express some of their beliefs about and attitudes towards the Bible. Such a setting disinhibited them, facilitating the responses above, some of which were expressions of hurt due to prior religious experiences. This mirrors Dave’s approach, for he too used the opportunity in a sanctioned setting to express his bitterness.

Sherwood’s own interest in the GOMA exhibition was less on the reading events which took place and those who annotated the Bible, rather she focused on the Bible as an object and its subsequent profaning. She went on to consider in more depth the public outcry and media response to these events, suggesting that:

In a quasi-Christological passion scene, the Bible became a fellow empathetic sufferer. It was seen as suffering a double violation; an offence against its own rights (as a quasi-subject and a stand-in for all Christian subjects) and an affront against its role as a founding document of rights. (2012, pp. 24-25)

My research is more concerned with the reader and the reading transaction, and less on the Bible as an object. However, what should be noted is that in this case and that of Dave, typically the readers dominated the texts. They used their opportunity to annotate, or comment on the Bible, as a vehicle through which to express hurt. Dave’s readings of the five texts were particular to him, but the relationship between a reader’s painful experiences and the readings which they shaped is not.

The field of social psychology sheds light on both Dave’s reading of the five texts and to a lesser degree on the GOMA exhibition. In turning to this field, I am not claiming that Dave’s readings can be wholly explained by it, but social psychology has been helpful in theorizing how people respond to different situations, and I am bringing those insights to bear upon

Dave's Bible readings. This conforms to the broader sociological approach I have adopted and follows the example of others who have incorporated insights from social theory and social psychology into their studies of Bible reading practices or religious performance (Esler, 2005; Camery-Hoggatt, 2007; Herriot, 2007).

"Bitter" Reading from a Social Psychology Perspective

There are two concepts found in the field of social psychology which shed light on Dave's reading of the five texts. The first is disinhibition, which usually refers to "a reduction in the usual social forces that operate to restrain us from acting antisocially, illegally or immorally" (Hogg & Vaughan, 2011, p. 470). For example, Leon Mann (1981) investigated the role which deindividuation (a form of disinhibition) played on crowds who were goading individuals to commit suicide (by jumping off a building). He found that being part of a large crowd, standing at a distance from the victim and the darkness of night, disinhibited people resulting in a greater likelihood that they would bait and jeer the victim. Disinhibition need not always result in antisocial speech or behaviour. In his study on online disinhibition John Suler uses the phrase "benign disinhibition" to describe "unusual acts of kindness or generosity" towards others in an online setting (2004, p. 321).

In my case, the way in which I designed the research disinhibited my participants. They were given assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, and more specifically I requested their own thoughts and comments on the texts. The prior knowledge that any reading would be viewed as legitimate and valuable would have resulted in some men feeling free from certain inhibitions which may normally surround the reading of the Bible.

There are two particular inhibitions worth noting, the first concerns tolerance and the second respect. First, as Sherwood points out (2012, p.31), tolerance is viewed as a cornerstone of western democratic existence, and so in the West there is an implicit expectation that the Bible should be treated tolerantly rather than contemptuously. Second, as the sacred text of Christianity, Britain's present and historically dominant religion, it is a text imbued with religious and moral significance. It may not be read, nor indeed thought of as relevant to modern life any more (Field, 2014) but as James Crossley argues, as part of Britain's heritage

it “retains its symbolic and nostalgic power,” (2011, p. 209).⁹⁷ This reflects Robert Detweiler’s suggestion that even a non-believer would venerate a sacred text from their own social tradition (1985). As such, it is therefore a book which many will feel should be treated with respect rather than disdain. Such inhibitions however were lessened by the research setting and resulted in Dave’s sceptical reading of the five texts.

Catharsis is another concept that sheds light on Dave’s readings. Popularly catharsis is understood as “letting off steam,” and it is underpinned by the theory that expressing emotion, typically towards an inanimate object, is a way of releasing those emotions in a safe environment (Aronson, Wilson and Akert, 1999). For example, Patricia Middlebrook recounts that in Japan “several companies provide a special room where workers can take out their aggressions on a toy replica of their boss to relieve their tensions” (1980, p. 297). Cathartic theory is at odds with some research which suggests that such cathartic acts can result in an increased sense of anger or frustration rather than the alleviation of those emotions (Bushman, 2002; Krahé, 2012). For example, research which has explored the effects of viewing violent acts, or taking part in aggressive sports, has shown they can increase the level of aggression in the viewer/participant (Wann *et al.* 1999). However, in a counselling or therapy setting the expression of pain, anger, sadness and other negative emotions has been found to aid in the restoration of the person concerned (Jemmer, 2006; Hankle, 2010). For this reason scholars have advocated the use of a text (for example the Psalms) as a stimulus for the expression of emotion within a therapy, counselling or pastoral setting (Ritblatt and Ter Louw, 1991; Sawyer, 2004; Owens, 2005; Myerstein and Ruskin, 2007).

In Dave’s case his reading and annotating of the Bible was a cathartic act, something that cannot be known about those who annotated the GOMA Bible. Dave expressed his hurt and subsequent rejection of religion through reading the five texts sceptically. Having done so, his attitude towards the Bible seemed to change. In the Exit Questionnaire he was less critical of the Bible than in the Entrance Questionnaire. He was no longer as categorical in his Exit Questionnaire that the Bible was full of myths and legends or that it was untrue, and where in the Entrance Questionnaire he indicated that the Bible was irrelevant and out of date, this was

⁹⁷ Similarly in a North American context T. J. Wray suggests that “the Bible has become more of a *symbol* of faith-much like a cross or an icon,” rather than a collection of sacred writings which should be read (2011, p. 2, emphasis in original).

not the case in the Exit Questionnaire. One possible reason for this is that having taken the opportunity to express his bitterness through reading sceptically, and understanding that those readings were accepted and valued, he felt less bitter.

This is the first example of the way in which some readers' prior experiences significantly influenced their reading of the texts. In Dave's case, he used this sanctioned setting to express his bitterness towards religion by engaging sceptically with these texts. This demonstrates the influence which past experiences have in the life of the reader, and their relationship with the text. However, not all men's prior religious experiences lead them to read as Dave did, for example Gary's experiences lead him to read the texts "indifferently."

Gary's Detached Readings

Gary is 48 years old and is one of the utility technicians who kept the many boilers and tanks running in the Plant. He and his colleague Zadok were friendly, always offering me a cup of tea whenever I met them. Gary described himself as a "lover not a fighter" and that seemed an apt description of his approach to life. He did not attend church regularly but did speak fondly of the religious services which he took part in whilst at school.

Dave and Gary are similar in a number of ways: they are in their 40s, work in a Chemical Industrial Plant, identify as "not at all religious," and both have had painful experiences of religion in the past resulting in their sceptical reading of the texts. In Gary's case these experiences would shape his reading in two ways. First, those experiences would lead him to reject Christianity and so the Bible and these texts, viewing them as something personally insignificant. Second he would directly link some of those experiences to the texts which he read.

Gary's sceptical readings were not as emotionally charged as Dave's. Instead, they were marked by a distinct indifference towards the texts, as became apparent by his lack of annotation on most of the texts. This contrasts with Dave who also rejected Christianity but annotated all five texts. Gary annotated the first two texts, but the rest were left blank. This seemed unusual and so I raised this subject in our interview and he said:

I read it and I re-read it, I have a general opinion of this, which isn't a strong opinion, because of the fact that I don't believe [...] You know, and if nothing stood out, ok nothing stood out. I tried to make, tried to see at the beginning, because I wanted it to be detailed for you, but then I thought well, but that's not how I feel and I realised after the second time that you know, that what you want is for me to give you my opinion, not to give you as much detail as, you know, as maybe could be given by somebody else.

Gary had annotated the first two texts because he felt a need to provide me with details and comments. Thankfully he realised that all I wanted was his opinion and that an unannotated text was just as valuable as one covered in notes. To that end he found that he had no comments to make on the final three texts and would probably have left the first two blank had he grasped this at the beginning. As our conversation developed we spoke about the value of an unannotated text and he said:

Generally, nothing generally stood out because. And I believe that the reason for that, I don't believe in that [indicating the five biblical texts]. So it's like, it's of no importance to me [...] I have a belief system or a non-belief system, I know what I know and I believe what I know, so I'm just stuck in my ways [he laughs].

In Gary's case his lack of annotation was a reflection of the unimportance and disbelief which he placed upon the texts, something he linked to a wider "non-belief system." In the corresponding questionnaires Gary typically highlighted areas which he disagreed with in the texts, indicating that four texts contained nothing worth remembering and all five were irrelevant to today's world. In our interview, Gary spoke about each text often emphasizing how unbelievable he found them or how unrealistic they seemed. For instance, when I passed him a copy of Psalm 88 and asked "what did you make of that one?" He replied:

Oh right, been there, been in trouble. Wow there you go, that's the same thing really, but putting his faith in the Lord and I think it's a big thing. What you need to do and if you don't believe, saying that anger has overwhelmed him, the terrors have paralysed him, darkness is his closest friend, yeh, blaming the Lord for driving his friends away. I just thought, well that's somebody who's depressed to me, that's all that was, and they've obviously decided to blame the Lord which

obviously I wouldn't do but ... again it's just an unbelievable situation for me personally.

Gary had earlier indicated that his decision not to believe in God had been made in part due to two painful experiences. He recounted how the Roman Catholic Church of which his fiancée was a member had stated that, if they were to marry there, he had to agree that any children they had would be brought up within the Roman Catholic tradition:

But I thought what a thing to say to somebody "you can't get married in my church unless you agree to my faith" and I just thought. That was a big thing to me at the time, because I didn't hold things that important faith wise.

He then went on to speak about the pressure which his wife and her grandmother put him under to attend church.

Then it was, "oh we'd like you to come to church," "no I don't want to come to church," "well you should," "no I'm not going to." So in the end that was ok, but I just distanced myself from it all after that [...] Anyway as I got older I just developed a decision based on everything else. I decided that I don't believe in God, don't believe in religion and that was the way I decided to go with it.

The condition which the church placed upon conducting their wedding, and the pressure Gary's wife and her "God fearing" grandmother put on him to attend church directly encouraged Gary to distance himself from Christianity. This in turn would result in his viewing the biblical texts as unbelievable and unimportant, all of which resulted in unannotated texts. Phil Zuckerman (2012), in *Faith No More: Why People Reject Religion*, notes this link between disbelief of the Bible and prior painful experiences. One of his participants was David, a former Jehovah Witness, and Zuckerman writes:

Today he [David] can debunk the story of Noah's ark as being so implausible as to be nothing more than a fairy tale, and yet he believed in this "fairy tale" for more than half his life. Something happened to change his perspective. Something happened to tighten the screws and change the wiring of his internal credulity meter. What happened was this: his life didn't work out so well. His wife cheated

on him, then divorced him, and he found himself stuck in a series of dead-end jobs, with little money to pay for even basic utilities. Thus, it wasn't really the manifest absurdity of the story of Noah's ark that caused him to view Christian beliefs with a sceptical eye. Rather, it was misfortune. (2012, pp. 52-53).

Here what Zuckerman labels "misfortune" I have described as "prior painful experiences." "De-conversion" is assumed to be a multifactorial transition away from a faith community (Barbour, 1994; Streib, 2012), however, often people can recall an incident or context which they identify as the beginning of this transition (Zuckerman, 2012). In Dave's case, he directly linked his painful experiences to the sceptical readings he undertook. With Gary, his painful experiences resulted in his disenchantment with Christianity and the establishing of his "non-belief system." From such a position the Bible was then viewed with incredulity, treated with little importance and read sceptically.

The Masowe weChishanu's Rejection of the Bible

In my case with Gary, or Zuckerman's case with David, the Bible was rejected as these men moved away from some sense of religious affiliation. This rejection of the Bible has been noted in those who de-convert (Wright, Giovanelli, Dolan and Edwards, 2011), or distance themselves from organised Christianity (Jamieson, 2002, pp. 86, 169). However one of the most detailed explorations of the rejection of the Bible by a group of people was carried out by Matthew Engelke (2007). He spent 18 months (spread over a 7 year period) researching the Masowe weChishanu Church in Zimbabwe. As a group, they call themselves "the Christians who don't read the Bible" (2007, p. 2) making this one of their defining features. They identify with the ministry of Johane Masowe (John of the Wilderness), a self-designated prophet who taught that people could receive the Word of God directly from the Holy Spirit and so did not need the Bible. Masowe's view changed and towards the end of his ministry he accepted the Bible as the Word of God, a contentious and divisive decision for his followers (p. 102). Nevertheless, the Masowe weChishanu Church continues not to use the Bible.

Engelke's context is different to mine, for he is exploring the lack of Bible engagement within a church in Africa whilst I am exploring Bible reading by those outside the church in England. However, by choosing Engelke's study as a central conversation partner with Gary's readings two similarities are noted. First, the Bible is viewed as a tainted text by the

Masowe weChishanus. It is a text linked to white missionaries and so to the colonial powers who subjugated their land, as Engelke writes: “In postcolonial Africa the Bible carries an indelible essence of white might” (p. 245). From this perspective the Bible is inseparable from, and a tool of, both missionaries and colonisers. Engelke describes Masowe’s childhood as one in which he was probably aware of missionary infighting and discord, suggesting that it “may be that these instabilities disabused him of the notion [...] that the Bible was significant or powerful as missionaries were claiming” (p. 86). However, the more consistent emphasis which he presents is that of the Bible identifying with foreign oppressors and so being rejected. Masowe is said to have described the Bible as coming from “men with black hearts” (p. 5) and is quoted as saying you “should burn the religious books of the European as our forefathers did not have books” (p. 94).

Gary never described the Bible as a tainted text, but the way he read the five texts indicates he viewed it in this way, for he linked certain texts to specific painful experiences in his past. For example, Gary not only described his wife’s grandmother as “God fearing” but he would go on to describe 2 John as being “written to get people to have a faith and believe in this faith, and there you go that is the punishment if you don’t. God fearing, it’s a God fearing text.” This was a text which, like his wife’s grandmother, was threatening and coercive, and he summarized it in this way:

[What it is] saying is if you don’t believe in God, well then that makes you an evil person. “Everyone who encourages such people becomes a partner in their evil work,” what evil work is that then? Not believing in God? That’s, I just thought well, I don’t believe that I’m evil I’ve got very good intentions and got a lot of time for people and I wouldn’t tell people they shouldn’t believe in God, but equally people shouldn’t tell me that I should believe in God.

Echoing his wife’s and her grandmother’s attempts to get him to church he would also suggest that 2 Samuel 5:17-25 and Psalm 88 were designed to convince people to believe in God. Most poignant however were his comments regarding Matthew 18:21-35 and the theme of forgiveness. Gary and his wife divorced and something of that experience informed his reading of this text:

I know you can't do that [forgive] all the time, you can't expect everybody to forgive every single thing, but I think people should be looking to try and do that, for their own peace. But I can't say that I've been brought up, I can't say that it's the church that has taught me that. I would say that it is my family that has taught me that [...] Getting divorced was a very difficult situation for me to deal with, em. But in the end I couldn't forgive what happened. I tried to see it and I still try to see it sometimes, but I don't get hung up on it anymore, because I can be happier and I am happier and I can be happier still by moving on.

Gary's linking of the texts to particular painful experiences in the past, divorcing his wife or the pressure he was put under to attend church, demonstrates the way these texts were tainted for him and the direct way in which these painful experiences shaped his reading.

For Gary and the Masowe weChishanu the Bible was a tainted text and so rejected. In Gary's case this tainting was due to personal painful experiences, often involving religious people. In the case of Johane Masowe and his followers it was because of the corporate painful experiences derived from the link between the Bible and the colonisers. In both cases, these experiences resulted in a detachment from the biblical text.

Second, for the Masowe weChishanu the Bible was "stale" and "out of date," irrelevant to their lives and the contexts they were living in (2007, p. 6). They believed that the Holy Spirit would speak God's Word directly to them, addressing contemporary issues and specific situations. In Gary's case he viewed it as a text containing ancient wisdom which is either common to all of humanity or has now been superseded. He described the purpose and place of the Bible in this way:

Back then [...] in general people weren't as educated as we are today. It was a way of explaining certain things in a different way or getting them to believe in certain things in a different way. Whereas today everybody's adults and most people are educated certainly within the Western World, I don't think it fits, I just don't think it fits.

This sense of irrelevance along with the accompanying tainted nature of the Bible was part of the reason both Gary and the Masowe weChishanu distanced themselves from the Bible.⁹⁸ Such a view of the Bible contrasts with other Christians who have also experienced the effects of colonialization and yet understand it to be a liberating force (Mesters, 1989). For example, as Engelke points out (2007, pp. 71-74), the South African Desmond Tutu argues that the Bible is an authority other than the missionaries, one which challenges the social injustices and inequalities connected to colonising (Tutu, 1994).

As someone who has a “non-belief system” and has “moved on,” Gary’s comments were not angry nor did they contain the level of emotion which Dave showed. Gary expressed a level of detachment towards Christianity and that was evidenced by his lack of annotation and the associated lack of significance which he placed in the five texts. In some way these texts were part of a previous stage in Gary’s life, a painful one, but one from which he had moved on from and these two factors significantly shaped his reading of the five biblical texts.

Readers’ Experiences and the Transactional Theory of Reading

Dave and Gary make up the first example to evidence my claim that these readers’ relationships with the five biblical texts shaped their reading of those texts. In their case, all five texts were read in very similar ways, suggesting that it was not the content of the individual texts which activated certain memories, although Gary did make specific links. Rather, the anticipation itself of reading a biblical text brought to mind particular past experiences which then informed their subsequent readings. Rosenblatt writes that “the text is the stimulus that focuses the reader’s attention so that elements of past experience - concepts linked with verbal symbols - are activated” (1994, p. 11). These experiences would include prior readings of the same text or prior experiences which shaped the reader’s attitudes to or beliefs about the text. For Dave, Gary and at least six other participants, their prior relationship to Christianity was found to shape their reading of these texts. This relationship, with all its thoughts and feelings, was brought to mind as they were preparing to take part and became a dominant factor as they read each of the five texts.

⁹⁸ Engelke notes two further reasons the Masowe weChishanu reject the Bible. Its materiality was considered evidence of its lack of authority, for it can fall apart or be used as toilet paper. Second, if the Bible is viewed as the Word of God then it can be used to challenge the authority of a church leader, so by rejecting the Bible this threat was also eliminated (2007, p. 245).

It is worth noting that the memories which were stimulated in Dave and Gary were not personal experiences of reading the Bible, rather they concerned the actions of certain Christians. Dave and Gary's reading of the five biblical texts demonstrates the link which they made between the actions of certain Christians and the Christian faith and so the Bible. This resulted in the five texts which I gave them being associated with those experiences which occurred up to 30 years ago. This web of association demonstrates the importance of viewing the reader and their subsequent reading not through one narrow preselected lens, such as personality or gender, but with an awareness of the myriad of factors within each reader which have the potential to impact the reading (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 30).

Rosenblatt posits that there is not one correct meaning, nor is any reader ever able to claim complete and absolute understanding of a text. Nonetheless, an appropriate (or responsible) reading can be claimed, with the possibility of equally valid interpretations existing, based on agreed criteria for interpretation (1994, p. 183). In arguing this, Rosenblatt builds on John Dewey's idea of "warranted assertibility" (1938; 1941), which contends that whilst absolute knowledge or truth cannot be claimed, one could speak of truth and knowledge in a qualified way, aware that new evidence may arise or different criteria used to interpret the context. The three criteria which Rosenblatt suggests should be used to measure the appropriateness of any reading are:

1. That the context and purpose of the reading event, or the total transaction, be considered.
2. That the interpretation not be contradicted by, or not fail to cover, the full text, the signs on the page.
3. That the interpretation not project meanings which cannot be related to signs on the page. (2005, p. 23-24)

In light of these three criteria I would argue that Dave and Gary did not read the texts fully. Their experiences were so significant that they dominated the readings, resulting in each reader singularly focusing on aspects with which they disagreed and ignoring other large sections of text. A selective reading such as this produces an interpretation unsupported by the text (Rosenblatt, 2005, pp. 75-77). The transactional theory also assumes that in the toing and froing between the text and the reader, the first conclusion reached may be wrong, but that the "text itself leads the reader toward this self-corrective process" (Rosenblatt, 1994

[1973], p. 11). Dave and Gary did not allow the text to correct their interpretation and accompanying rejection. They were unable or unwilling to suspend the dominant influence which their past experiences were having upon the reading transaction. For this reason, their interpretation of the texts reflected their relationship with Christianity (in this instance their prior painful experiences at the hands of Christians) more than the signs on the page. This does not invalidate the readings which occurred, but it does suggest that the interpretations and responses to the texts were not fully supported by the texts (1995, p. 77). Rosenblatt notes that a reader's:

past experience and present preoccupations may actively condition his [sic] primary spontaneous response [to the text]. In some cases, these things will conduce to a full and balanced reaction to the work. In other cases, they will limit or distort (1995, p. 75).

Conclusion

This chapter has begun to explore how a reader's relationship with five biblical texts shaped their reading of those texts. First I unpacked the transactional theory of reading highlighting its view of the reader and the text as members of one dynamic system, and that a reader brings all that they are to a text, with certain elements of the reader informing the reading more than others. This was the first strand of my central argument.

I then turned to the first of four examples which demonstrate different ways in which a reader's relationship with a text shapes their reading of that text. These examples form the second strand of my argument by evidencing the theory explored in the first. In particular, this chapter examined the influence of the reader's prior experiences. In Dave's case, his painful experiences of Christianity resulted in him reading the texts sceptically, focusing on aspects which he disagreed with, at times in an emotionally charged way. The parallels between his engagement with the five texts and the annotations on the Bible placed in the *Sh[out]* exhibition, demonstrated that his engagement was not unique. Gary's readings were then considered, and here the influence of his prior experiences was seen in the distance at which he held the text, the disbelief which dominated his readings and the direct links which he made between certain texts and his experiences. In his case two parallels were noted between his engagement with the texts and the Masowe WeChishanu's rejection of the Bible as a tainted and irrelevant text.

However, in demonstrating the way in which these two reader's prior experiences shaped their reading of the five biblical texts, I have been arguing that a series of reading transactions took place. In particular, that Dave and Gary's readings are theorized by the transactional theory which allows for the experiences of the reader to inform their reading of a text, as was the case with these two men. Having introduced the transactional theory and demonstrated the impact of the reader's prior experiences upon their readings, the following chapter introduces another two influences seen in the readings which occurred at the Chemical Plant: the men's religious identity, and their attitudes towards the Bible.

CHAPTER 5: Reader Shaped Readings - Identity and Attitude

Underpinning the assertion that my participants' relationships with the five biblical texts shaped their readings of those texts is an understanding that both my participants and the texts are part of the same dynamic system. They had an existing relationship before I brought them together, mediated through the reader's contact with the Bible and Christianity. The subsequent reading transaction which followed then clarified the tone of that pre-existing relationship. In this chapter I will now consider the influence of the reader's sense of religious identity, and attitude, upon their readings.

The first half of the chapter explores the significance of the reader's religious identity. In particular I consider the readings of John, who identifies as an atheist, and Anthony, a Christian, highlighting how their different sense of religious identity resulted in very different readings. Having done this, a link between the participant's identity and the accompanying sceptical or accepting reading is suggested. However, the second half of the chapter will nuance that link by highlighting two readers whose religious identity did not correspond with their reading of the texts. In the case of Victor and Paul, their attitude towards the texts had a greater bearing on the reading than their sense of religious identity. Although Victor identified as "not at all religious" he read the texts both sceptically and acceptingly, having decided to "be fair." Paul identified as "moderately religious," but found that his doubting attitude resulted in him reading these texts sceptically. These two examples do not result in the rejection of the link between a reader's religious identity and their reading of the texts, rather it warns against the assumption that all (non)religious men will read the Bible in a certain way.

Case studies, such as this one, can produce insights which complicate commonly held assumptions, because by focusing upon one case in greater depth new insights can emerge which challenge pre-existing theories (Gerring, 2007, pp. 37-63; Flyvbjerg, 2011). To that end, this chapter troubles contextual Bible reading methods which assume that the geographical setting in which the Bible reading takes place significantly influences that reading (Peden, 2005; Riches, 2010). It does this by showing the major role which the reader's religious identity played rather than their workplace identity or setting. Furthermore, the sceptical or accepting binary which the first half of this chapter develops, and can also be seen in the writings of biblical scholars (Davies, 2004) and theologians (Volf, 2010), is then

challenged. For the variety of readings which were seen suggests that a spectrum rather than a binary is preferred and cautions against the belief that these men and their readings are all the same.

The Influence of the Readers' Religious Identity

Contextual Bible Reading

The Contextual Bible Study method (CBS) is one example of an approach to Bible reading which values the reader and their context, understanding that both will inform the reading which takes place. Readers are not encouraged to detach themselves from their social setting or their personal preoccupations, rather these are brought to the text so that there may be a meaningful connection between the reader, their context, and the text (Riches, 2010, p. 15). Susannah Cornwall describes it in this way:

As might be expected from its name, CBS is deeply committed to context, and to recognizing particular social, economic, cultural and class settings as legitimate sites of God's revelation. (2012, p. 15)

In particular CBS understands that a reader's geographical context will inform their reading. John Riches writes:

Contextual Bible Study is in an important sense 'local'. When you join a CBS group, you will almost certainly be joining with people who come from your own area, or who have some shared experience. CBS groups are set up to help people discuss the issues that are closest to home, whether those are the things that are happening in their daily lives, or important things that are going on in the community that surrounds them. (2010, pp. 23-24)

For example, Alison Peden facilitated CBS sessions at a women's prison in Stirling and noted that the prison setting, and the inmates' experiences of arrest and imprisonment, informed how the Bible was read. The thoroughness of the prisoners' close reading of the passages caused her to wonder "whether their facility of noting words and sense comes from their experiences of endlessly poring over legal documents relating to their case, prison reports and so on" (2005, p. 16). The types of questions which were asked of the texts and ensuing

discussion often related to the prison context and experience as well. For instance asking “how long did Jesus get when he was arrested?” or was he “angry when he was arrested”? (2005, pp. 15-16). Even though the women also linked their previous life experiences and female identity to the texts, Peden concludes that:

CBS provided a wonderful way for women to make some sense of imprisonment and to give a language to their experience [...] Their readiness to align text and their own context brought new insights and frames of reference to the Bible. (2005, p. 18)

This valuing of the reading context, as a source of influence upon the reading taking place, led Louise Lawrence to undertake CBS in a city, a rural village and a fishing village, arguing that it is a useful tool in helping people recover a sense of place (2009).⁹⁹

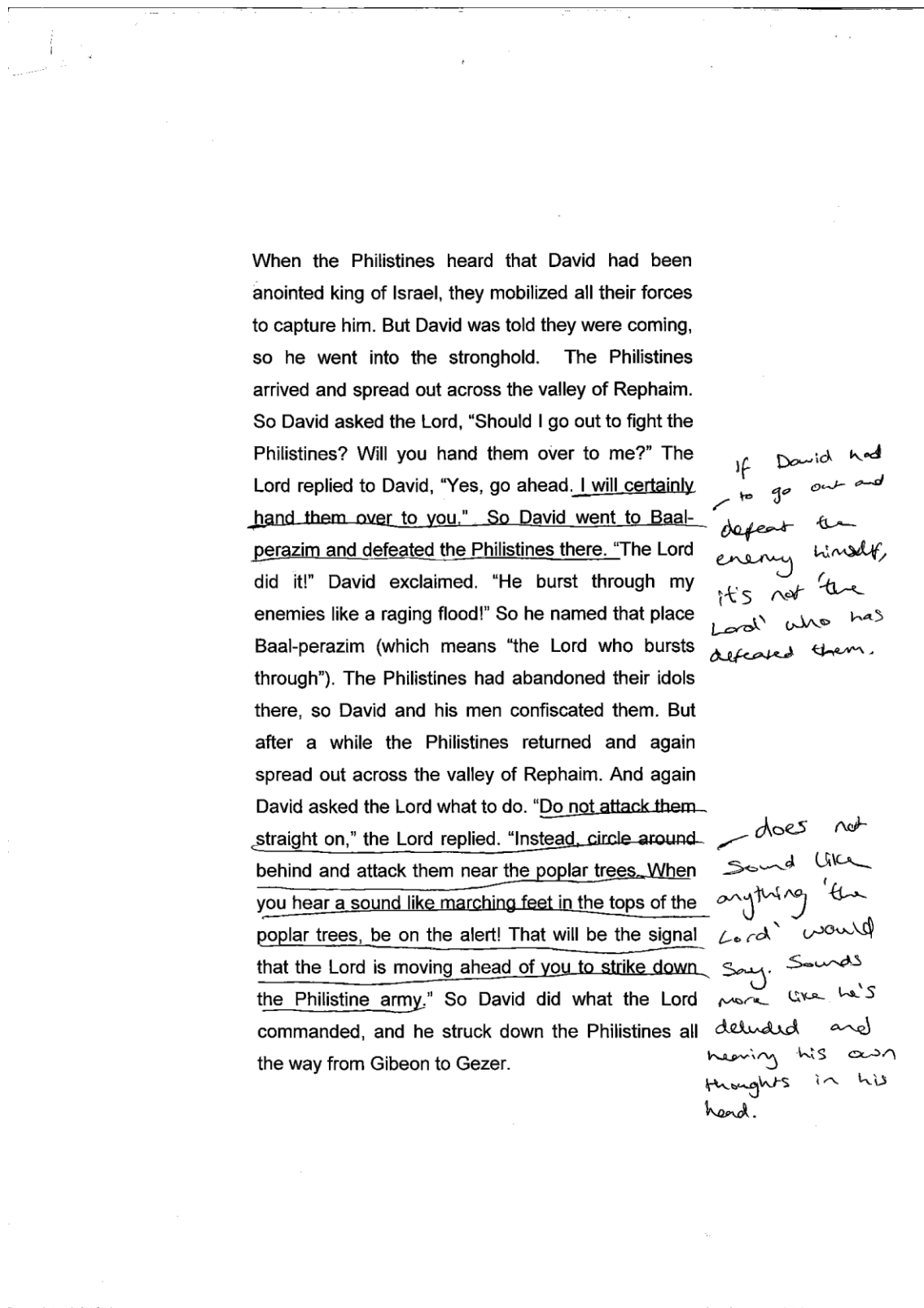
Accordingly, it could be assumed that the Chemical Industrial setting of my own project would inform the Bible readings which took place there. Indeed the transactional theory of reading also assumes that the setting contributes to the reading transaction which takes place (1994, p. 81). However, as this chapter will go on to illustrate, it was not the participants’ work setting which significantly informed their readings but rather it was their sense of religious identity. In particular, I will consider John and Anthony who represent a group within the study, including Andy G, Mick, Matty, Derek, Ethan, Richie and Tony, whose religious identity played a direct role in their readings. John worked as a manager at the Plant and as an atheist identified as “not at all religious.” This sense of atheist identity would shape and be reaffirmed by his sceptical readings, readings which I then explore in light of insights from social psychology. Anthony is another manager but identified as a Christian, and so “moderately religious.” In his case his Christian identity would go on to shape his readings of the five texts and as a result of having read them he would indicate a re-strengthening of his desire to read the Bible. Once again, what John and Anthony’s examples demonstrate is the way in which a reader’s relationship with a text shapes their reading of that text.

⁹⁹ Lawrence (2009) also facilitated CBS sessions with a deaf community and a group of clergy, showing that CBS is not only interested in the geographical context but other social locations as well.

John's "Atheist" Readings

John is the youngest participant in my research, aged 22, and he had worked as a manager at the Chemical Plant since graduating from University. John grew up in a Roman Catholic home and attended Catholic schools, but did not get Confirmed because by the age of 13 he realised that he did not believe in God. John identified as an "atheist" and "not at all religious." He was not outwardly antagonistic towards Christianity, and his parents identified as Catholic as did his girlfriend who attended church on a regular basis. Indeed he felt that the Bible was good for teaching morals and those that studied it "will probably turn out as better people, than people who haven't." Nonetheless, John read four of the five texts sceptically: Proverbs 10:1-11, 2 Samuel 5:17-25, Matthew 18:21-35 and 2 John. As I will demonstrate this was a sceptical reading shaped by his atheist identity and one which strengthened that same sense of identity. Figure 2 is a copy of his annotations on 2 Samuel 5:17-25.

Figure 2: John's Annotations on 2 Samuel 5:17-25



John's sceptical reading is evidenced in his annotations on this passage where he twice argues that David did not hear the voice of "the Lord" and he defeated the Philistines without "the

Lord's" help. In the accompanying questionnaire these criticisms were repeated. When asked: What, if anything "jumped out at you as you read through the passage? John wrote "David just seems to be mistaking his own tactics with something 'the lord' is saying to him." He would go on to describe this text as irrelevant and express frustration "that stories like this are believed."

During the semi-structured interview, as was my practice, I passed him a copy of 2 Samuel 5:17-25 and asked "what did you make of this one?" He replied:

Ok I mean this one especially, that this is in the Bible is just. I mean this guy who's saying, "help me defeat these enemies, bla, bla, bla," and he was saying like, you know, how it was God who defeated them. But it wasn't, it was just this guy had some tactics on how to defeat them and then heard a little voice in his head say, "yeh that's a good plan" and then he did it. And, and it just implies why would God chose one side over another? And you know, what makes this guy so special that you chose his side? And why would you even endorse conflict in the first place? It is just so counter intuitive to what the Bible teaches.

John's sceptical reading of this passage can be seen in this multi-layered critique, rejecting the text not only on ethical and historical grounds, but also suggesting that it contradicts the general teachings of the Bible. John's reading of this text resembles his reading of Proverbs 10:1-11, Matthew 18: 21-35 and 2 John, for with those texts he also singularly focused upon sections he disagreed with, resulting in their rejection.

In our interview, John would directly link his sceptical reading of these texts to his atheist identity. When I asked him if he had any general comments about the five texts, he said: "my gut feeling, you know, my attitude towards religion and stuff like that, from an atheist standpoint, that was sort of reinforced." He went on to suggest that my choice of texts "were a bit obscure, so if you were on the fence you would probably lean more towards not believing in God." Later when I brought to his attention the sceptical nature of his readings he responded saying:

Reading all of those [indicating the five biblical texts], just sort of affirmed to me that yes I am an atheist and I can't quite believe everything that's written in the

Bible. Because at the end of the day it was a human, it was humans who wrote it, it wasn't any, you know it wasn't, God didn't write this Bible.

At the end I asked him if the texts had been what he expected, and he replied:

I guess because I've not looked at any passages from the Bible since I was [...] 13 or something. I guess now I can, I'm more critical of it, I mean I can spot the errors in it a lot more, em. So I don't know, it's just reaffirmed that I am an atheist.

Contrasting the sceptical readings of the other four texts, John read Psalm 88 in a more accepting way. Nonetheless, his atheist identity would continue to shape his reading of this Psalm understanding it to uphold his sense of identity and belief system. He did not annotate this text, but when asked in the questionnaire, what, if anything, was your "gut reaction" to this passage, he wrote:

Pleased that there is something in the Bible that suggests God doesn't exist and gives an accurate depiction of the lack of response that would be received when praying or searching for God.

Of all the texts this was the only one he suggested was worth remembering "because it would help to come to the realisation that God doesn't exist or doesn't care enough to respond, without wasting your whole life trying to get a response." These sentiments were repeated in the interview where John said:

As they [the Psalmist] are reaching towards the end of their life they are thinking about dying and they still haven't had this connection with God and it's just like well, why have you continued, you know, believing in him?

John's readings show that once again the reader's relationship with the five biblical texts, on this occasion his sense of religious identity, shaped his reading of these texts. In particular, not only did John's atheist identity shape his readings, but he found that the readings strengthened that identity. Every reader's sense of identity will influence how they interpret a

text, but in John's case it significantly overshadowed his reading. Much like Dave and Gary's readings, this was a transaction between the reader and the text dominated by the reader.

John responded to all the texts in a very similar way suggesting that it was not the content of the texts which produced the strong reaction rather it was the fact they were biblical texts. Rosenblatt does not refer to a reader's sense of identity shaping their reading, however she does note that "a personal preoccupation or an automatic association with a minor phrase or an attitude toward the general theme will lead to a strong reaction that has very little to do with the work" (2005, p. 75). I would argue that for John there was an "automatic association" (2005, p. 75) between the five texts and the Bible, he read these five texts acutely aware of their biblical identity. They represented the wider Bible, a book viewed as the Word of God by the Roman Catholic Church (Flannery, 1992), a church which John had rejected. Thus his atheist identity emerged as one of the most salient aspects of his relationship with these texts and resulted in him reading sceptically.

"Atheist" Reading from a Social Psychology Perspective

The subject of identity and Bible reading has been explored in the past from a sociological perspective. For example, Liam Murphy notes the way in which the Bible is used to inform the identity and actions of charismatic Christians in Northern Ireland (2009); Akesha Baron highlights the role which the Bible plays in gender identity in a Mexican context (2009); and James Bielo (2009b) builds on David Hess's concept of "dialogical" (1993)¹⁰⁰ to explore the way a group of Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) women use a Bible study setting to mark out the distinctions between their denominational identity and that of others. Common to all of these examples is the way the Bible, or biblical tropes, are engaged with by a particular individual or community and used to shape or reaffirm a socially constructed identity. Echoing these works and following the example set in Chapter 4, I will explore John's readings in light of three concepts found in social psychology: priming, social identity theory and schema theory. Having done so, I suggest that John's readings were more of an automatic, rather than intentional, response to a biblical text.

¹⁰⁰ Hess argues that his interpretations "are not only influenced by social contingencies but also situated in an arena of debate and dialogue with my Others" (1993, p. 157), something he describes as "dialogical."

“Priming” is a term used by social psychologists, and is similar to the concept of “selective attention” which Rosenblatt uses.¹⁰¹ Both terms refer to the process whereby certain thoughts, ideas, feelings and emotions are selected from others, to play a dominate role in a person’s response to a particular situation. However, “priming” also considers what factors resulted in the selection of those specific thoughts, ideas, feelings and emotions (Baron & Byren, 2000, p.88). For instance, researchers have shown that people can be primed to respond in a particular way. Tory Higgins, William Rholes and Carl Jones (1977) exposed a group of students to different positive and negative terms, such as “brave” and “adventurous,” or “foolish” and “reckless.” Then, in what the participants thought was an unconnected experiment, they were asked to read and respond to a short passage. A correlation was found where those who had been exposed to the positive words viewed the character in the passage more favourably, whilst the opposite occurred with those who had been primed with the negative terms. In my case, I presented my project as one exploring how men outside the Church might read the Bible, explaining that it was those who were not religious, did not read the Bible and were not interested in Church whose views I was most keen to hear. In doing this my participants may have been primed to read the texts with a heightened sense of their (non)religious identity, as demonstrated with John.

The second concept is social identity theory, which understands that people have a sense of identity derived from their membership of a particular group, for example: their sports team, profession, ethnicity or religion (Hogg & Abrams, 1998; Greil & Davidman, 2007). Therefore any one person has multiple identities as they are part of many social groups. The social psychologist Henri Tajfel is usually credited as pioneering this theory and defined it in this way:

Social identity will be understood as that *part* of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his [sic] knowledge of his [sic] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership. (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63, emphasis in original)

The concept of social identity has been used by biblical scholars (Esler, 2005; Lau, 2011; Tucker & Baker, 2014) and sociologists of religion (Greil & Davidman, 2007) in their

¹⁰¹ My thanks to Paul Rodway and Astrid Schepman for alerting me to this.

analysis of various religious and nonreligious communities. Some, like the contributors to *Social Identities: Between the Sacred and the Secular* (Day, Vincett & Cotter, 2013), use it as a label to refer to socially constructed individual and group identities, but take it no further. Others, like psychologist Peter Herriot (2007), consider in greater depth various aspects of social identity theory with reference to two particular case studies: the Anglican controversy over gay clergy, and Mohammed Atta the leader of the twin towers attacks. As I have shown, John understood that his atheist identity was the most salient identity when it came to reading the five biblical texts rather than his ethnicity (English) or job title (Process Manager). With reference to religious social identity, Jeffery Seul concludes “religion frequently serves the identity impulse more powerfully and comprehensively than other repositories of cultural meaning can or do” (1999, p. 567). It is therefore no surprise that John referred directly to his atheist identity five times in our interview, but never mentioned his ethnicity or job title, even though I directly enquired about his work, training and future career.

Michael Hogg and Graham Vaughan go on to note that “people also think, feel, believe and behave in terms of the relevant prototype” (2011, p. 127). In other words, in a situation where a person feels their atheist identity is the most appropriate for that setting, the accompanying thoughts, feelings, beliefs and actions will be informed by their expectation of what an atheist would think, feel, believe and do. Furthermore, scholars have also found that people typically accentuate their response to something that challenges their social identity, enlarging the differences between themselves and an opposing group (Eiser, 1996; Lyons, 1998). In other words, according to social identity theory someone who identifies as an atheist will probably have an enhanced response when asked to engage with a religious icon such as the Bible or a biblical passage, as seen in John’s sceptical readings.

In a similar manner, social psychologists also use the phrase ‘self-schema’ to describe the way an individual perceives themselves in relation to a particular context (Lyons, 1998). Self-schema theory and social identity theory overlap, for both presuppose that people have multiple identities and that an individual’s sense of identity shapes how they respond to a setting. However, self-schema theory also includes character traits or a personality profile which may be thought of as part of a personal rather than social identity.

Schema theory, of which self-schema is a subset, is principally concerned with how humans respond to and make sense of everyday life. Louise Pendry (2012, p. 94) describes a schema

as a “cognitive shortcut,” because it is a way of interpreting and responding to situations without the need to think about them, it is an automatic process we are unaware of. Part of the purpose of a schema is to provide a person with coherence and stability in potentially highly complex and uncertain situations, and it is therefore a powerful thing (Hogg & Vaughan, 2011). Schema theory has influenced educational practices, especially with reference to reading, for it suggests that each reader’s schema informs how they read (Pearson, 2009; McDonald & Swinger, 2009). The theory is applied directly to biblical exegesis by Jerry Camery-Hoggatt who argues that “the mind organizes experience into schemas and then taps those as it needs to in order to fill in the gaps in the language of the text” (2007, p. 97). Mary Crawford and Roger Chaffin (1986) also use schema theory when reflecting on the difference between male and female readers in their study. They suggest that the readers’ sense of gender, as part of their schema, shaped the readings which occurred, resulting in a difference between the genders.

According to self-schema theory, “our sense of who we are is dramatically shaped by the current situation, but also influences our interpretation of it” (Penry, 2012, p. 133). In John’s case it was his sense of atheist identity which he felt was most appropriate for reading the five biblical texts, and it was this identity which shaped that reading. A self-schema does not only enable a person to engage with information easily, but it often results in a response which affirms the schema (Lyons, 1998, p. 332), schemas are very resistant to change and “people are resistant to schema-disconfirming information” (Hogg & Vaughan, 2011, p. 60). In other words, normally the information is processed in such a way that the schema is maintained and the person’s sense of stability and coherence remains. In John’s case, his atheist identity (self-schema) influenced his reading of the biblical texts in such a way that that same identity would be re-affirmed.

These concepts from social psychology are automatic mechanisms all humans use to navigate life, and accordingly they should be understood as spontaneous responses to a stimulus. Not only do they explain some of reasons why John’s atheist identity was the salient factor which shaped his readings, but they also indicate that this was an instinctive response. In many ways he could not help but read the texts in that way. Such a reading, dominated by the participant’s sense of religious identity was seen in other men as well and Anthony provides a good comparison.

Anthony's Christian Readings

Anthony is a 59 year old manager at the Plant and was looking forward to retirement. He keeps active, playing tennis regularly, golf on occasion, and had bought a kayak the previous summer. Anthony grew up going to a local Church of England and has continued to attend church on and off throughout his life. At present he does not regularly attend, but his wife does. He identified as a Christian and someone who is “moderately religious,” describing God as “somebody who’s prepared to listen, and you can sort of have a conversation with and I’m not always very good at doing that.” His view of the Bible was informed by his Christian faith, understanding it to be God’s message to humanity. Due to the strength of his religious identity I did not imagine Anthony being the type of participant who would take part in my project. However he fulfilled the entrance requirement in that he did not regularly attend church or read the Bible, so we proceeded together.

Anthony read the five texts in an accepting way, concentrating on parts which he agreed with. Anthony’s annotations on 2 Samuel 5:17-25 are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Anthony's Annotations on 2 Samuel 5:17-25

When the Philistines heard that David had been anointed king of Israel, they mobilized all their forces to capture him. But David was told they were coming, so he went into the stronghold. The Philistines arrived and spread out across the valley of Rephaim. So David asked the Lord, "Should I go out to fight the Philistines? Will you hand them over to me?" The Lord replied to David, "Yes, go ahead. I will certainly hand them over to you." So David went to Baal-perazim and defeated the Philistines there. "The Lord did it!" David exclaimed. "He burst through my enemies like a raging flood!" So he named that place Baal-perazim (which means "the Lord who bursts through"). The Philistines had abandoned their idols there, so David and his men confiscated them. But after a while the Philistines returned and again spread out across the valley of Rephaim. And again David asked the Lord what to do. "Do not attack them straight on," the Lord replied. "Instead, circle around behind and attack them near the poplar trees. When you hear a sound like marching feet in the tops of the poplar trees, be on the alert! That will be the signal that the Lord is moving ahead of you to strike down the Philistine army." So David did what the Lord commanded, and he struck down the Philistines all the way from Gibeon to Gezer.

belief that God was on his side.

?
 belief that what is promised happens.

Was this expected behavior? Were they wedded without idols to worship?

obedience

Anthony focuses on David's belief in, and obedience to, God. He read this as an accurate historical account, not questioning its ethics or the idea that God communicated with David, rather the questions which Anthony posed regarded the significance and motivation behind

David's actions in confiscating the Philistine's idols. In the related questionnaire Anthony summed up this passage with the phrase "communication and obedience" indicating this was its key lesson and was one worth remembering.

In our interview, Anthony spoke briefly about this text, saying

David seems to have great faith in God and God seemed to help him a lot, and didn't seem to eh. But as, it almost gave the impression as long as David did what God said then God will deliver.

Here again the concepts of communication and obedience are seen along with "faith." Anthony contrasts with John, raising none of the latter's questions or critiques. Anthony read all the texts in a very similar way, drawing out what he understood to be their central message in an accepting way. He would go on to describe all the texts as worth remembering and relevant to today's world.

In the same vein as John however, his sense of religious identity shaped his reading of, and response to, the five texts, but in his case it was a Christian identity. Anthony did not directly link his readings to his religious identity, but when asked why, unlike many of the other men he had read these texts acceptingly, he replied "I think I approached the passages in a positive way, I was looking for there to be a positive message in them."

Anthony identified as a Christian and viewed the Bible as a divinely inspired book, a book which contained "positive messages." To that end when he read through the five texts, he did so "looking for there to be a positive message in them," he read them acceptingly. Much like John, it was his religious identity and associated beliefs which informed his reading of the texts rather than his workplace identity. As social identity and self-schema theory anticipate, his Christian identity was instinctively assumed to be the most salient one for this setting, and it then shaped his reading of the texts.

Unlike John, he did not explicitly state that his religious identity and beliefs had been reinforced by reading the texts. Instead, Anthony expressed the sentiment that reading these texts had been a positive experience and had encouraged him to read the Bible more. When recounting how reading the five texts had been a positive experience he said:

Probably what I'm saying there is I would be quite happy to read the Bible, but I don't always find the time. It's not my bedside book and I wouldn't know where to start you know, maybe you should just open it and read something and hope.

He would repeat this sentiment later, saying:

Sometimes reading the Bible and being asked to think about what you've read gives people the, people who want to, the time to maybe reflect a little bit on how that relates to them and what they are up to. And that's where reading the Bible is a good thing. Sometimes, I wish I did it more often.

A few weeks after finishing the project I passed by Anthony's office and we spoke briefly. He told me that he had accepted an invitation from a man at his wife's church to take part in a Bible reading course. In accord with social identity and self-schema theory, Anthony's attitude towards the Bible was strengthened, as he expressed and acted upon a desire to read the Bible more.

Furthermore, in much the same way that John's readings were overshadowed by his atheist identity, Anthony's were overshadowed by his Christian identity. For instance, even though Psalm 88 is one where God does not respond to the Psalmist's cry for help and scholars such as Artur Weiser have described it as "unrelieved by a single ray of comfort or hope" (1962, p. 586), Anthony interpreted it as if it claimed that God would intervene. Where John believed that Psalm 88 questioned God's existence and directly affirmed his atheist belief, Anthony suggested it demonstrated that "God is always there, even if it's not clear what he is doing or whether he is listening." He went on to say that this was a Psalm designed to "strengthen our faith" and "test our faith." Such a reading echoes Robert Detweiler's description of a "faithful reader" being one who:

Approaches the text aggressively, determined to believe it, and hence she [sic] 'fills in' the indeterminacies in an attitude of acceptance, adopting a position she [sic] would not take with any other kind of text. (1985, pp. 224-225)

Anthony was able to find a positive message in the most hopeless of texts.

Identity and Bible Reading: A Link

The difference noted between John and Anthony's readings was mirrored by other participants as well, for it was their sense of religious identity which most closely correlated with how sceptically or acceptingly the texts were read. Most of the men who read sceptically identified as "not at all religious" (Dave, Sam, Ethan, John, Matty, Andy K, Gary, Peter, Mick, Zadok and Stewart), and the four men who read acceptingly (Andy G, Tony, Derek and Anthony) all had some sense of religious identity. A sceptical or accepting binary could be suggested, with the existence of a link between these readers' sense of religious identity and their subsequent reading.

At times this link was a direct one, and the men's sense of religious identity dominated their readings, as was the case with John, Anthony and a group of seven others. However, at other times it was indirect, as was seen in the case of Dave and Gary where the religious experiences which informed their readings also resulted in them identifying as "not at all religious." This indirect relationship between the reader's religious identity and their reading of the texts was more common than the direct linking of identity with reading seen with John and Anthony. Nonetheless, the reader's religious identity often corresponded to their reading of the texts.

This finding affirms the belief that a reader's social location informs their reading of the Bible, and in my case it was principally the reader's sense of religious identity.¹⁰² The significance of this is especially notable when other social locations are considered. For example, of all the annotations only two directly linked part of a text to the Chemical Industrial context, see Figures 4 and 5. In the questionnaires and interviews no participant directly linked their workplace setting to the texts.

¹⁰² In my analysis of the data no significant difference was noted when the age, educational background, or profession of the participants was specifically considered.

Figure 4: Dave's Annotation on Proverb 10:9

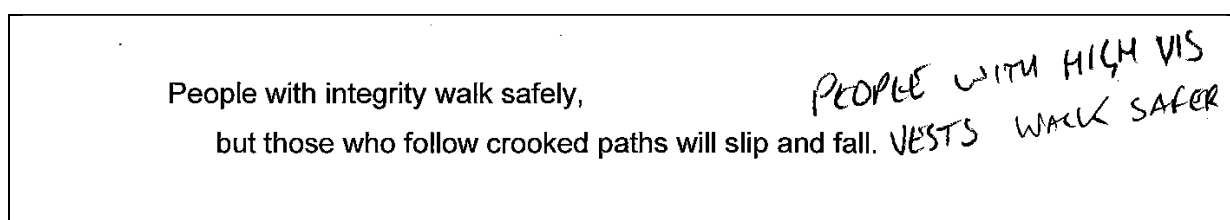
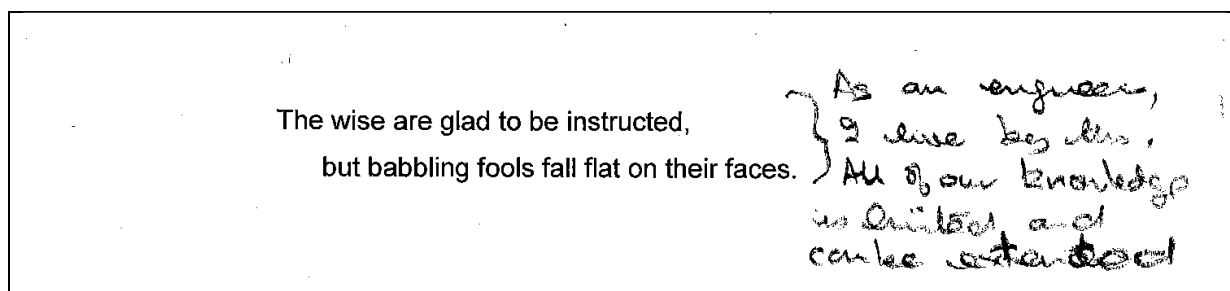


Figure 5: Bob's Annotation on Proverbs 10:8



This minimal linking of the reading site to the readings which took place does not reject the presupposed contextual nature of any reading event, but suggests that the influence of certain contexts may not be quite what some have assumed (Trueman, 2006). In this case study, the Chemical Industrial setting and associated workplace identity played a minor role in the reading event compared with the readers' religious identity.

There are two ways in which this lack of workplace influence should be qualified. First, as I highlighted earlier in the chapter, the participants were primed by being told that this research focused on men who do not regularly read the Bible. This was more likely to stimulate the men's sense of religious identity rather than their workplace identity. The weight given to this priming influence is difficult to gauge. What would be required is a comparable study where the participants are invited to read through a series of texts having been told that the influence of the reading site was being explored.¹⁰³

Second, as I will show in Chapter 6 there is the potential that the workplace context encouraged a particular type of reading, even if it did not result in the participants directly linking their texts to their immediate working environment. That chapter demonstrates how most of these men read the texts as one would an instruction manual or guidebook. One

¹⁰³ Tiffany Webster's CBS with coalminers did this, and although her PhD has yet to be made accessible, I understand that the profession of the participants did not have the influential role CBS anticipates (2015).

reason for this could be the reading environment, for the other literature in their offices and portacabins were work related handbooks and protocols. Once again though the influence of this environmental factor is hard to gauge, and my conclusion in Chapter 6 is that it may have contributed to the way the texts were read, but there were more significant factors such as the men's belief that the Bible is a moral guide.

In the context of a woman's prison, Alison Peden found that her female readers asked questions of the text which were informed by their context, such as "how long did Jesus get when he was arrested?" (2005, p.15) and were readily able to make links between the prison setting and the Bible. However, on only two occasions did my participants directly link their workplace context to their readings. While acknowledging the two qualifications above, I would contend that this case study troubles the assumption that a reader's geographical setting has a significant bearing on the reading which takes place, as some contextual Bible approaches suggest (Riches, 2010; Lawrence, 2009).

Rajeswari Rajan makes a similar observation when reflecting on her own geographical location in India, for she notes that her affiliations rather than her geographical location shape her engagement with the world. She writes: "Location, however, is not simply an address. One's affiliations are multiple, contingent and frequently contradictory" (1993, p. 8). In her case, she is struggling to unpick her Indian postcolonial feminist identity from her academic one. The former is typically viewed as a peripheral position rooted in a particular life setting, whilst the latter is one with status and linked to the western academy. The theologian Nema McCallum (this is a pseudonym) also notes the diversity of influences upon an individual and their response to the world (or a text). In her case it is her experiences of being in psychiatric care as a young person rather than her gender which predominantly inform her work, even though she assumes the label "feminist theologian." She writes:

[My] experience of psychiatry, not my identity as a woman, is far more potent in affecting my sense of justice, style of theology, understanding of other people and thinking about God. (2007, 51)

In the case of John, Anthony and many of the men in this case study, it was their sense of religious identity and related affiliations which would dominate their readings, rather than the reading site.

John's and Anthony's readings are further examples of a reader's relationship with the five texts shaping their reading of those texts, in their case it was their sense of religious identity. This identity not only shaped their readings, but was also reaffirmed in those readings. John and Anthony however were not alone and a correlation was noted between most of the men's sense of religious identity and their reading of the five texts. Whilst contextual Bible reading methods understand the geographical context to play a meaningful role in the reading which takes place, in my case the Chemical Industrial setting was hardly mentioned. However, this link between the men's religious identity and the associated sceptical or accepting reading which I have been arguing for must be nuanced, for there were exceptions. As I will go on to explore there were men whose religious identity did not correspond to the expected sceptical or accepting reading, and so the use of a sceptical/accepting binary is troubled in the second half of this chapter.

The Influence of the Readers' Attitude

Having demonstrated a second way in which my readers' relationships with the five biblical texts shaped their reading of those texts, I will now consider a third. Once again what follows will show the reader assuming a central controlling position in the reader/text relationship, but on this occasion it is the reader's attitudes which dominate. Leslie Francis defines an attitude as:

A relatively permanent and enduring evaluative predisposition to a positive or negative response of an affective nature which is based upon and reflects to some extent evaluative concepts or beliefs learnt about the characteristics of a referent or group or referents. (1984, pp. 4-5)

This definition corresponds well to other multi-dimensional ones (Summers, 1970; Coolican, 2014) and Francis has applied it to the study of religion (Francis & Kay, 1984). Attitudes play significant roles in how any individual navigates life, and so it should be of no surprise that they shaped the Bible readings.

Most of the men directly expressed a particular attitude, or set of attitudes, towards the biblical texts, the Bible, Christianity more broadly or religion in general, which was seen to

inform their readings. However, what follows will deal with two men in particular, both of whom were unsure what to believe about the Bible and in different ways described themselves as “sitting on the fence” in relation to it. However, their attitudes towards the five biblical texts were very different, Victor had an open attitude: he was keen to “be fair” to the texts. This resulted in him being one of only two participants who read the texts both sceptically and accepting, breaking the binary framework. Paul had a doubting attitude which led him to focus on things he disagreed with in the texts, so even though he identified as “moderately religious,” overall he read sceptically. His sceptical reading however was not as all-encompassing as some men’s, for on occasion he referred to certain texts positively. These examples demonstrate that rather than a sceptical/accepting binary a spectrum of readings were noted, and that the readers’ religious identities did not always correspond to their Bible reading.

A Sceptical and Accepting Binary

Up until this point I have made use of a “sceptical” or “accepting” couplet to describe these men’s readings. My use of such a pairing mirrors similar binary frameworks used by other scholars. For instance, in *Whose Bible is it Anyway?* Philip Davies (2004 [1995]) argues for a non-confessional reading of the Bible within biblical studies. A confessional reading, he posits, is one whereby the reader is more likely to dominate the biblical text, whereas a non-confessional reader “tries not to force her or his own expectations on the meaning of the text, is prepared to disagree, be shocked, and perplexed” (2004, p. 49). According to Davies, confessional readings are not wrong, but should be kept in the church. In a secular biblical studies department, the Bible student/academic should assume an etic position (that is an outsider’s perspective) engaging with the Bible non-confessionally (p. 50). What is of primary significance to my case study is the binary framework which Davies is assuming, that of “confessional” and “non-confessional” Bible reading. This is a framework which others have used, either to identify their work (Lewis, 2007), argue for a particular approach to Bible reading (Milne, 1997; Moore, 2002) or for a need both perspectives (West, 2005). It is similar to other couplets which have also been adopted. For example, echoing Paul Ricoeur, Miroslav Volf refers to two Bible reading styles: a “hermeneutics of respect” and a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (2010). He argues that a hermeneutics of respect is preferable, lending itself to “the possibility of genuine disclosure” rather than a hermeneutics of suspicion which he suggests “is not a method of interpretation, it is a strategy for

‘debunking’” (2010, pp. 34-35). Once again it is Volf’s use of a binary framework to describe Bible reading which I wish to highlight. Other examples include David Jasper’s use of “hermeneutics of faith” and “hermeneutics of suspicion” (2004) and the American Bible Society who refer to “Bible lovers” and “Bible skeptics” (2014). What follows will demonstrate how men like Victor, Paul and others do not fit such a neat binary and its associated assumptions that there are only two ways to read the Bible, that all readings within each category are the same, and that everyone fits into one of the two categories.

Victor’s “Fair” Readings

Victor is a 31 year old scaffolder, who had previously worked for 13 years as a delivery driver. He identified as “not at all religious” having never regularly gone to church or read the Bible. Like most of my participants he indicated that school was the main context where he was exposed to the Bible. However, unlike many of the men, Victor did have a Bible at home. It belonged to his one year old son who received it at his Christening.

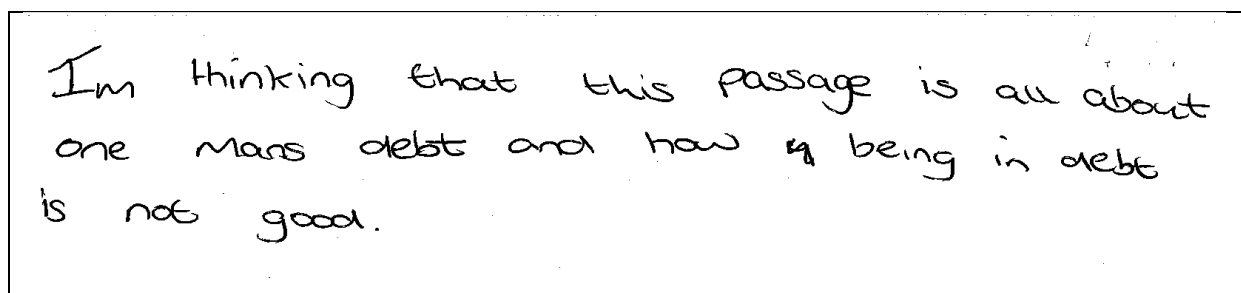
In the Entrance Questionnaire I tried to gauge the participant’s attitudes to and beliefs about the Bible by giving them 22 statements about the Bible.¹⁰⁴ Victor indicated that he did not hold any strong opinions on the Bible: for 13 of the 22 statements he neither agreed nor disagreed, and he was unsure about a further five. This corresponded with his view of God, for he described himself as being “half and half, I’m in the middle,” neither believing nor disbelieving. Nonetheless, in light of the link which I noted earlier between the reader’s sense of religious identity and their reading of the texts, I expected Victor to read the texts sceptically as most of the other men had, but he did not; he read them both sceptically and acceptingly. He did not concentrate solely on parts of the text with which he disagreed (or agreed), instead he commented on the text in general, agreeing with some parts and disagreeing with others. For example, 2 John is a text which Victor did not annotate because “nothing jumped out.” In the related questionnaire and at interview he summed it up in a very similar way: “This passage to me is all about how love is real and that how they believe in the love of God.” Victor went on to note things he agreed and disagreed with in this text. This was a text about “love,” and this was something he valued, writing “I agree that love is good.” However, he then went on to qualify that statement by adding that “I don’t believe that just because you love someone it means that the love is from god.” Victor concluded that

¹⁰⁴ See Appendix D for a copy of this part of the Entrance Questionnaire.

this passage was not that relevant to today's world because "I think you love people for you and not because god is with us." By highlighting areas and concepts in the text with which he agreed and others with which he disagreed, Victor's reading of this text was one which contained both sceptical and accepting elements; he broke the binary.

Of the other four texts, Victor read two slightly more sceptically, Proverbs 10:1-11 and 2 Samuel, and two slightly more acceptingly, Matthew 18:21-35 and Psalm 88. That is to say, his readings of the former had a few more comments pointing out problems he had with the text, whilst his readings of latter had more comments highlighting aspects he agreed with in the text. For example, his annotation of Matthew 18:21-35 comprised of the short statement shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Victor's Annotations on Matthew 18:21-35



Victor summarizes the passage as being "about one mans [sic] debt" before implying that it emphasizes "how being in debt is not good." This comment does not indicate whether he agrees or disagrees with the text, but in the accompanying questionnaire he described the passage as one worth remembering because "debt is a bad thing." During our interview I passed Victor a copy of this text and asked him what he made of it, and he said:

It was more about, that he was kind of in debt and that [...] he thought he'd got away with it and, kind of, was forgiven. And then obviously at the end it, kind of, came back to him. I put: "it always catches up with you."

Victor had read this text differently to most of the other nonreligious men. He had not concentrated on aspects of it with which he disagreed rather he focused on what he understood to be its main point, "that debt catches up with you." Contrasting his opinion on 2 John, he thought Matthew 18:21-35 was a text worth remembering because it warned against

getting into debt, a warning he agreed with. Victor's interpretation of this parable concentrated on the consequences of the debt which contrasts with most scholars, who in light of the question "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me?" (Matthew, 18:21) suggest that forgiveness is its central theme (Keener, 1999, pp. 456-461; Nolland, 2005, pp. 751-762). I enquired if there were any reasons, such as a past experience, why he had focused on avoidance of debt rather than the merits of forgiveness in this parable, but Victor indicated that there were none; it was just how he had read the passage.

During our semi-structured interview I pointed out to Victor that the way he read these texts was different to the sceptical readings undertaken by most of the other nonreligious men. He replied:

Victor: I think, probably I, I think when I read it I gave it a chance, I just didn't think, "oh this is about the Bible, it's going to be rubbish." I read it and thought about it.

David: Was that a conscious decision "I'm going to give this?" Or is that just your kind of personality?

Victor: Yeh, because I wasn't, I was going to be fair, I wasn't going to read it and think well, "this is rubbish," "I don't understand it," and write down any old, "I don't understand," "I don't agree."

Victor, proactively decided to give "it a chance." He was "going to be fair." Victor was aware of the scepticism which I have identified with a nonreligious reading of these texts but he chose to suspend it and assume an open attitude. This did not lead to a consistent accepting reading of the texts, but to a sceptical and accepting one. In this way then a further aspect of a reader's relationship with a text is seen to shape their reading of that text, in this case it was their attitude towards the text.

The decision to assume an open attitude which Victor showed here was not unique to this occasion. Victor and his wife had their son Christened and gave him Godparents, because "it's just the normal thing what people do." These Godparents gave the young boy a children's Bible at the Christening and, in line with the open attitude Victor demonstrated in

my project, he and his wife have read it to their son. He said: “I mean it’s not that routine to be honest. Bedtime routines, but at first we were reading him, like bath and then book and then bed. So we were reading him a part of it.” Victor’s attitude towards the Bible was evidenced prior to his encounter with the five texts I gave him, as seen in his decision to read his son bedtime Bible stories.

Victor’s example acts as note of caution against assuming that all nonreligious men will read the Bible sceptically. In his case an open attitude resulted in a sceptical and accepting reading which did not correspond to his religious identity. This does not result in the rejection of this link rather it highlights the need for caution and the inappropriateness of the assumption that all men who identify as nonreligious will read the Bible sceptically. Furthermore, this reading demonstrates the limitations of a sceptical/accepting binary framework which cannot accommodate Victor’s readings.

Rosenblatt notes that a degree of self-awareness and an appreciation of the influence of our prejudices are desirable in a reading transaction. She writes of the reader:

His [sic] first need is to understand his [sic] own emotional response to the person or situation [Rosenblatt infers text as well]. He [sic] realizes that preoccupations and prejudices may have led him [sic] to exaggerate some things and ignore others. He [sic] has to bring his [sic] basic moral or psychological assumptions out into the open to test the validity of their application to this new situation. (2005, p. 215)

Rosenblatt is arguing that if a reader found their preoccupations and prejudices to have resulted in a misunderstanding of a text, they should be able to disassociate themselves from those preoccupations and prejudices to some degree. The result of this should be a more appropriate reading, for a “good” reader is one who “submits himself [sic] to the guidance of the text” (2005, p. 265).

In Victor’s case, even prior to reading the first text he had made a decision to try to not prejudge them or read them as many other nonreligious men had. He was aware of the potential which every reader’s preoccupations and assumptions have to shape the reading and he sought to acknowledge and ignore them as best he could. Victor’s reading echoes

Wolfgang Iser's (1980, p. 65) description of a reading experience as one where "we must suspend the ideas and attitudes that shape our own personality before we can experience the unfamiliar world of the literary text." In so doing the reader is able to consider that which had been foreign to them. Similarly, Hans-Georg Gadamer who pointed out the impossibility of a reader's prejudices not informing their reading, describes a reader as one who is willing to "remain open to the meaning of the other person or of the text" (1979, p. 238). In doing so he anticipates that ultimately "the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one's own fore-meaning" (1979, p. 238).

Victor decided to give the texts "a chance" as he was "going to be fair." He was the only participant to express a sense of having chosen to adopt an open attitude. In turn, his reading of the texts was then shaped by that attitude. Perhaps because of this decision, Victor was the only participant who noted that in 2 Samuel 5:17-25 the Philistines were the aggressors. Most of the men referred to this text as if King David and the Israelites were the aggressors. His example challenges both the sceptical/accepting binary framework which the first half of this chapter developed and the link between the reader's religious identity and their reading of the texts, for he conformed to neither. Such was the significance of his attitude in shaping his reading.

Paul's Doubting Readings

Paul is another example of someone whose attitude towards the five biblical texts would significantly shape their reading of those texts and who also troubles the earlier binary framework. Paul, is a 36 year old scaffolder, who identified as "moderately religious" describing himself as a "non-practising" Catholic. He attended a local Roman Catholic Church as a boy, only stopping when his family moved away from the church parish. Much like Victor, he is married and also has a young son, whom he plans to send to church when older. Paul was also unsure about the Bible. Of the 22 statements about the Bible, in the Entrance Questionnaire, he indicated "neither agree nor disagree" 19 times. It was therefore no surprise when he later described himself as "sitting on the fence." On the three occasions when he did not indicate "neither agree nor disagree" in the Entrance Questionnaire he responded as might be expected from a moderately religious man. For instance, indicating that the Bible was not full of myths and legends and that he imagines he will read the Bible in the future. Therefore I thought he would read the texts acceptingly, but he did not.

Paul read three of the texts sceptically (Proverbs 10:1-11, 2 Samuel 5:17-25 and 2 John), tending to concentrate upon the parts of them which he disagreed with. For instance, Paul, like Victor, did not annotate 2 John; he said “nothing stood out,” and so left the text blank. However in both the questionnaire and interview he focuses on two problems he had with the text. First, he said it claimed “if you don’t, sort of, follow the beliefs, or this, then you’d be, sort of, cast aside.” Second, that it contradicts itself in that God “commanded that you love one another, but he’s also given orders that people battle against one another [...] it’s like singing off one hymn sheet and singing off another isn’t it?” This was a text which he considered to be of no relevance to today’s society and bordered on the “bullying” as it taught “get on side or face being cast aside.” Accordingly, God’s rule “looks more like a dictatorship” which contrasts with the idea that “everyone is supposed to be free aren’t they? But in that [2 John] they are not.”

Nonetheless, Paul did not read all the texts sceptically; Psalm 88 and Matthew 18:21-35 were texts which he read sceptically and acceptingly. For example, his annotations of Matthew 18:21-35 are seen in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Paul's Annotations on Matthew 18:21-35

DOLLARS?
THOUSANDS
THAT SOUND
OF MONEY DON'T
LAST -

Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!" "Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. He couldn't pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt. "But the man fell down before his master and begged him, 'Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.' Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt." "But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. "His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it,' he pleaded. But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full. "When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?' Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt. "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart."

ALOT
TO
LET GO

Paul's two statements do not reveal an overly sceptical or accepting reading. However, in the accompanying questionnaire he indicated that concepts like "mercy and compassion" were at

the heart of this text and these virtues were worth remembering and relevant to today's society. In his interview however he was less positive about this passage. He began by speaking about forgiveness, saying: "yeh the first one lets him off, which is out of the kindness of his heart, it's great." However he then goes on to concentrate on the punishment which the King orders:

I'm just unsure about the punishment that he got because, you know, because he, because he let him off [...] it just seems to, well, he's tried to get his money back and then, we don't know the reasoning and that's why I'm a bit, I don't know.

This reading reflects Victor's sceptical and accepting reading in that Paul notes parts of the text with which he agrees and parts with which he disagrees.

In light of Paul's readings we discussed his attitude towards the Bible in our interview:

Paul: I'm still quite on the fence with some of the things, even though, like I say, I'd like to believe. I'm also, well, I don't know. You know, I do have it in my head that I do, I do believe in Christ and stuff, but I'm still open minded to, you know, when you say the example, the hungry will, the poor will, what is it? The poor will? [referring to Proverbs 10:3]

David: The Lord will not let the hungry, the godly.

Paul: The godly go hungry. And it's when you hear stuff like that and you think, they do. And I think sometimes folk, that's. I'm not. That's why I'd rather sit on the fence, but I'm not. That's why I'd rather sit on the fence instead of saying I agree or disagree.

At the end of every interview, as Tom Wengraf indicates (2001, p. 205), it is considered good practice to ensure that your participants are given the opportunity to add a further comment or ask any questions. Paul wanted to know if there were other Catholics who also found that the Bible's content did not match their life experience, asking:

I mean I'm talking in the sort of, I can't remember, what do you call them? The Catholic family, did they ever go "well these things aren't exactly, these things aren't happening." [Referring to the proverb "the godly will not go hungry."] So, yes ask the question: "Why?" to themselves. And I'm just wondering did they ever ask themselves those sort of questions?¹⁰⁵

Paul was struggling to relate his life experience with the implications of his religious affiliation. He is not alone in asking questions about the place of the Bible in the modern world. James Bielo noted something similar in an evangelical men's Bible study group in Michigan, USA. He observed that at times the men's life experience contradicted some of what they were reading in the Bible:

Throughout their study of Proverbs the LCMS [Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod] men devoted at least one discussion in every meeting to whether or not a particular text should be read as a "promise from God": a timeless certainty unbound by circumstance (2009b, p. 54).

When faced with this challenge, most of the LCMS group opposed interpreting proverbs as promises but rather concentrated on their practical outworking.

Paul and Victor were both unsure about the Bible, but one of the main differences between their readings was their attitude towards the five biblical texts. Where Victor indicated that he had never actively read the Bible and so had not formed a concrete opinion on it, Paul had. However, the Christian beliefs which informed his childhood were now seen to be faulty in light of his life experience. Doubt would mark Paul's readings of these texts, resulting in a sceptical reading. This once again challenges the link between a reader's religious identity and their reading of the texts. In Paul's case his doubting attitude was a greater influence than his moderate religious identity.

Identity and Bible Reading: A Spectrum

When Paul's readings are compared with Dave or Gary's what is noticeable is that not all men who read sceptically did so to the same degree. Indeed when these 20 men's readings

¹⁰⁵ Conforming to the ethical parameters of this research, my reply to Paul affirmed the value of his question and indicated that it was one that others had asked, but I did not volunteer an answer.

were analysed, rather than a sceptical/accepting binary, a spectrum was seen, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: The Spectrum of Sceptical and Accepting Readings

Strongly Sceptical	Typically Sceptical	Somewhat Sceptical	Sceptical and Accepting	Somewhat Accepting	Typically Accepting	Strongly Accepting
Dave Sam Ethan John Phil Matty	Andy K Gary Peter Mick	Paul Richie Zadok Stewart	Bob Victor		Andy G Tony Derek	Anthony

Key to Table 1

<p>Green = Not at all religious</p> <p>Red = Slightly religious</p> <p>Blue = Moderately religious</p>
--

The six men who in most settings (annotation, questionnaire and interview) commented on most of the texts sceptically I labelled “Strongly Sceptical.” Those who referred to most of the texts in most settings sceptically but on occasion acceptingly, I described as “Typically Sceptical.” The final sceptical group, of whom Paul was part, I labelled “Somewhat Sceptical,” for they engaged with these texts sceptically but inconsistently so, at times affirming texts or aspects of the texts as well.

The middle group of Bob and Victor typically read the texts sceptically and acceptingly. There were those who read the texts affirmingly in most settings but on occasion sceptically and so were labelled “Typically Accepting.” Finally, the smallest group in the table has only one member, Anthony, who engaged affirmingly with most of the texts in most of the settings. This table shows that the link between the participant’s religious identity and their reading of the texts remains, but the examples of Victor and Paul provide a note of caution.

They highlight that other factors, such as a reader's attitude, can have a greater impact upon the readings than their religious identity.

The spectrum which I have presented above, and the various ways in which different aspects of the men's relationship with the texts shaped their readings, confirms that this cohort of men should not be thought of as one homogenous group. Although I have considered men who are outside the Church, Lois Lee undertook ethnographic research amongst those who identify as "not religious," a label many of my participants used. She highlighted the diversity of identities and positions to which it refers. In particular, she noted five different ways in which this label was used: as a "synonym for another nonreligious identity" such as atheist or humanist; to "indicate a loose or general nonreligious position;" to express a rejection of religion but openness to alternative spirituality; by those who rejected religious/spiritual categorisation in general, something she calls "non-nominal;" and to communicate a personal indifference towards religion (2014, pp. 470-476). Callum Brown and Gordon Lynch also conclude, "people of no religion should not be regarded as a homogeneous group. They are extremely diverse in their outlook, philosophical position and priorities" (2012, p. 340).¹⁰⁶

Using very different language, a survey produced in 2007 by Tearfund entitled *Churchgoing in the UK*, subdivided the male population of the UK with reference to their attitudes towards Church attendance. It indicated that along with 11% of the male population who attend church regularly, another 13% of men are either open to the idea of attending church or attend infrequently, 28% have attended church in the past but have no desire to attend again and 38% have never attended church and do not plan to do so.¹⁰⁷ These three latter categories all refer to men outside the Church, demonstrating again that they are not one homogenous group.¹⁰⁸ My own findings are therefore not anomalous.

Pairings such as "sceptical or accepting," "confessional or non-confessional" (Davies, 2004) and "hermeneutics of suspicion or respect" (Volf, 2010) should therefore be used with caution. Binary models like these imply that there are only two ways of reading the Bible, that everyone fits into one of those two ways, and that all readings within each category are

¹⁰⁶ Theos' *Post-Religious Britain?: The Faith of the Faithless* (2012), similarly notes a variety of beliefs and practices amongst those who describe themselves as nonreligious.

¹⁰⁷ The final 10% are accounted for as belonging to another religion or being unassigned.

¹⁰⁸ In the USA similar research has been undertaken using the labels "Always Unchurched," "De-Churched," "Friendly Unchurched," and "Hostile Unchurched" (Stetzer *et al.* 2009).

similar. These assumptions however have been challenged by readers like Paul and Victor, and the breadth of readings which are noted in this case study.

Conclusion

The central claim in this thesis is that the reader's relationship with the five biblical texts shaped their readings of those texts. In particular the first part of this chapter noted the role which the participant's sense of religious identity played and the second half considered the role of their attitudes towards the biblical texts. In both cases, each aspect was seen to play a meaningful role, influencing how the texts were read.

John and Anthony were presented as two men whose religious identity significantly informed their reading of the five biblical texts. John, an atheist, read sceptically, whilst Anthony, a Christian, read acceptingly. Moreover, although John and Anthony's readings were unique to them, as a group there was a link between my participants' religious identity and their reading of the texts. The concepts of priming, social identity and self-schema theory were used to explore why both these men's sense of religious identity had been elevated over and against other socially constructed identities, such as their profession, to influence their readings. Furthermore, even though practitioners of Bible reading methods such as CBS believe that the reader's geographical setting will inform their reading, in my case, the Chemical Industrial setting was rarely linked to the five texts by the participants.

The second part of this chapter then troubled the sceptical/accepting binary which the first part had built, for there was a spectrum of readings, reflecting the diversity amongst this group of men. There were those, like Victor, a nonreligious man, who read sceptically and acceptingly, and Paul, a moderately religious man, who read somewhat sceptically. Indeed as a group a range of sceptical and/or accepting readings were seen. Moreover, the link made earlier between the men's religious identity and their reading of the texts was also challenged, for Victor and Paul's readings did not conform to this pattern. This does not result in the dismissal of this link, rather it warns against a naïve assumption that all men will read the texts according to their religious identity and highlights the diversity of readers. Ultimately though, it was Paul's and Victor's attitude towards the five biblical texts which this section explored, for although both described themselves as "sitting on the fence" with regards to the Bible their attitudes would result in very different readings.

Thus where Chapter 4 considered Dave and Gary's experience shaped readings, this chapter has brought to light the role of the reader's religious identity and attitudes towards the texts. Aware of the dangers in assuming that these men are one homogenous group, Chapter 6 will now explore the way a reader's beliefs about the five biblical texts shaped their reading of those texts. This is the fourth example I am using to evidence my central claim. In doing so, I will not focus on two men in particular, as I have done with each example until now, rather I will deal with them as a single cohort, for there were two beliefs which shaped nearly every participant's reading.

CHAPTER 6: Reader Shaped Readings - Belief

The previous two chapters explored the influence of the reader's prior religious experiences, religious identity and attitudes towards the five biblical texts. In doing so I presented Dave and Gary, John and Anthony, and Paul and Victor. These different couplets were used to demonstrate and unpack three different ways in which a reader's relationship with the five texts influenced their reading of those texts. Thus far I have concentrated on aspects of this relationship which heavily influenced some men's readings but not others. Rosenblatt argues that due to a process of "selective attention" certain experiences, feelings, ideas and thoughts will be pushed to the forefront of a reader's mind, shaping their reading more than others (2005, p. xxv). For instance Dave connected his sceptical readings to his prior religious experiences, but John connected his to his atheist identity. This does not mean that Dave's nonreligious identity did not play a role in his reading of the texts, nor that his experiences and identity were unconnected, rather it shows that for him his experiences were a more significant factor. Each of these three couplets, (Dave and Gary, John and Anthony, and Paul and Victor) represented a theme to emerge from my data, one seen in other men as well, but not in the group as a whole. Chapter 6 now turns to consider a fourth aspect, or theme: the impact of the reader's beliefs about the five biblical texts upon their reading of those texts. Contrasting the three earlier examples, this was evidenced in nearly all of the men's readings. In this chapter I will break from the pattern established in the previous two, by not focusing upon two particular readers in-depth, instead I will present data from a wider number of men to demonstrate the pervasiveness of this finding. In providing this final example, this chapter completes the second strand of my argument.

Andrew Village describes beliefs as:

Specific ideas or thoughts about something. In technical terms, belief occurs when an attribute is linked to an object: existence may be linked to God, trustworthiness to your vicar, or the presence of life to Mars. (2007, p. 29)

More often than not, when considering belief about the Bible, scholars have focused on issues of veracity, divine inspiration, and relevance (Harrison, 1983; Clines, 1997; Freathy, 2006; Walker, 2010; Field, 2014).¹⁰⁹ Village's study, for instance, in part concerned:

The extent to which the Bible might be literally versus symbolically true, the extent to which it might contain errors of fact, the degree to which its truths are exclusive to Christianity or available from other faiths, and the extent of biblical authority. (2007, p. 36)

I, however, will focus on two beliefs about the Bible which are not always considered, but emerged as strong themes in my data. First, that the Bible was an instruction manual and this belief resulted in the men reading it "efferently." This is the term Rosenblatt uses to describe the stance a reader takes towards a text when reading to gain information. Second, that the Bible sought to transform the reader, an act that was perceived as a threat by most of the men and to which they responded by "counter-reading." This is the term I use to describe the personal sense of threat felt by a reader which results in a sceptical reading of a text and so the invalidating of that text and the disarming of the threat.

I will first highlight the way these men typically read the texts for information, as one would a manual or guidebook. Using multiple examples I demonstrate the nature of this reading and its pervasiveness. This reading style is then compared with different labels scholars have used to describe such an act of reading, and I argue that the term "efferent" as used by Rosenblatt is the one which corresponds best to this reading phenomenon. Three possible reasons are given for the widespread efferent reading of the texts: the research materials encouraged the reader to assume an efferent stance towards the texts; the reader's personality and gender resulted in them assuming such a standpoint; and the reader's belief that the Bible is a didactic text or guide led them to read it efferently. Ultimately I will contend that although all three played a part, it was the participants' belief about the Bible which was the most significant factor.

¹⁰⁹ These studies often make use of a propositional and individualistic understanding of belief. This contrasts a practice-centred understanding which is linked to function and performance, or an institutional and society understanding connected with group affiliation (Day, 2011, pp. 3-27). In this thesis, because of the practical nature of my research, I have assumed a propositional and practice-centred view of belief.

I then turn to note that there is a popular opinion within Christianity that the Bible is a transformative text. This contrasts with the idea held by George Aichele (2001) and others (Vincent, 2012) that it has lost its authority in the Western World. I then demonstrate that part of the reason many of my participants read the texts sceptically was because they believed the biblical texts might try to convert them. This sense of threat was further emphasized by the assumption that I, a “religious guy,” was facilitating the process. Thus I argue that these men counter-read the texts that is, they responded to an assumed threat posed by the text’s assumed transformative potential, which resulted in their sceptical reading of the texts. This act of reading reveals a belief in the biblical text’s transformative potential which challenges those who argue that the Bible has lost its status in the West, but also troubles its supposed transformative capacity as these men were able to disarm that perceived threat.

The Influence of the Readers’ Beliefs

Reading the Texts as Textbooks

The first finding which can generally be seen in this group as a whole is that most of the men read most of the texts for information which they then critiqued. That is to say, no matter the genre nearly all the passages were handled as if they were guidebooks or didactic texts (of questionable quality). For example, Mick, a 30 year old scaffolder who described himself as “not at all religious,” having never regularly read the Bible or gone to church, referred to Proverbs 10:1-11 in this way:

Yeh, this to me was more like instructions of the path maybe. That they expect you to take, or otherwise these foul things are going to happen to you. That’s what I thought it was.

To read Proverbs 10:1-11 in this way is perhaps no surprise for this short list of aphorisms lends itself to be read as a compendium of wisdom or guidance. Indeed the book as a whole has been described as:

A course of study (a collection of wisdom teachings and saying)
designed to foster wisdom (the development of discernment and character)
using literary-rhetorical resources (juxtaposition and metaphor).

(Koptak, 2003, p. 23)

In other words the text itself (a didactic one) and the reading style (for information) correspond. As a letter, 2 John could also be described as having an instructional element, and Andy G, a 49 year old mechanic who, as a Freemason, identified as “moderately religious,” was not alone in picking up on that:

Basically yeh it was eh, it was just eh a letter telling the followers of Christianity not to forget what it’s all about and to keep on behaving in, as they should do towards others.

His summary indicates that he has read this passage so as to identify what he understood to be its purpose. Andy G handled this text as a didactic one, distilling its message accordingly.

However both Matthew 18:21-35 and 2 Samuel 5:17-25 had a narrative component which may have encouraged a reading style which did not focus upon what was to be learned. Nonetheless my participants consistently read these two texts for information as well, which they typically rejected. For example Peter, a 56 year old electrician who identified as “not at all religious,” read Matthew 18: 21-35 and said:

It’s offering you pie in the sky. That is my biggest problem with it, you want the good things in life now and while you are living, what happens after you die is beside the point.

His critique of this text reflects a reading which believes the text to be a guide or manual, with the promise of “pie in the sky” when you die for those who follow it. Richie is a 46 year old mechanic who identified as a “lapsed catholic” and so “slightly religious.” He described 2 Samuel 5:17-25 as “nonsense,” and when asked to clarify this comment he said:

Richie: A personal opinion, I mean I don’t think it ever happened, no.

David: Ok, that’s really helpful. And you are not the only one to say that.

Richie: That's someone going to an army and trying to give them a bit of belief that God is on their side, isn't it? What better way to say, "I actually spoke to him and he's told us what to do." People will follow that then won't they?

Richie's reflections on this passage focus on its historical reliability, and although he does not reject the battle account itself, he does reject the claim that God helped David. In the related questionnaire he would indicate that this was a text designed "to make the [present-day] people of Israel believe God is on their side." This again demonstrates a reading for information, understanding it to have a message for present day Jews.

Poems and songs should not be read for facts, but rather for the images and ideas they convey, for their potential to transport a reader to a different world (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 11). This is the case for biblical poetry as well (Westermann, 1980, pp. 5-9; Miller, 1986, pp. 29-30), of which Psalm 88 is one example. However, most of my participants also read this text for information, resulting in a disjunction between the text's genre (poetry) and the reading style (for information). For example, Sam is the 24 year old engineer who I presented in the introduction, and his reading of Psalm 88 typifies the way most of the men read it. Psalm 88 is a psalm of lament and has been described as a song (Anderson, 1972, p. 622), a prayer (Tate, 1990, p. 393) and a poem (Hossfeld & Zenger, 2005, p. 391). In the short descriptor I provided for the men, I described it as a song.¹¹⁰ Sam's annotations of this text can be seen in Figure 8.

¹¹⁰ See Appendix G for a full account of the short descriptor provided to the participants.

Figure 8: Sam's Annotations on Psalm 88

<p>Overall a very negative 'song' of man pleading</p>	<p>O Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out to you by day. I come to you at night. Now hear my prayer; listen to my cry. For my life is full of troubles, and death draws near. I am as good as dead, like a strong man with no strength left. They have left me among the dead, and I lie like a corpse in a grave. I am forgotten, cut off from your care. You have thrown me into the lowest pit, into the darkest depths. Your anger weighs me down; with wave after wave you have engulfed me.</p> <p>You have driven my friends away by making me repulsive to them. I am in a trap with no way of escape. My eyes are blinded by my tears. Each day I beg for your help, O Lord; I lift my hands to you for mercy. Are your wonderful deeds of any use to the dead? Do the dead rise up and praise you?</p>
<p>No chorus in the song</p> <p>Passage shows that god can turn on people</p> <p>he must have done something wrong</p>	<p>Can those in the grave declare your unfailing love? Can they proclaim your faithfulness in the place of destruction? Can the darkness speak of your wonderful deeds? Can anyone in the land of forgetfulness talk about your righteousness? O Lord, I cry out to you. I will keep on pleading day by day. O Lord, why do you reject me? Why do you turn your face from me? I have been sick and close to death since my youth. I stand helpless and desperate before your terrors. Your fierce anger has overwhelmed me. Your terrors have paralyzed me. They swirl around me like floodwaters all day long. They have engulfed me completely. You have taken away my companions and loved ones. Darkness is my closest friend.</p>

Sam's annotations indicate that he read this text for information, which he analysed and commented on. He critiqued the genre, describing it as a "very negative song" and noting that it had "no chorus." Before highlighting that it "shows that god can turn on people," a comment indicating he has read this text with an eye for what information or teachings the Psalm is trying to communicate. His comments on this text at interview were similar:

It seemed a bit long winded to be a song, if you know what I mean. But I don't know, they might have had different songs back then. Em, no I, I thought this was quite negative really, showing how again, how God can be cruel and he can, if you don't do, if you don't follow him or do what he says, then he'll make your life miserable I suppose.

Sam's response to this Psalm shows that it has been read in a didactic fashion. He analysed this text as a song, finding it lacking in necessary format and style. Then, focusing on its content he surmised that it has a central instruction, or fact, which is: "if you don't do what he [God] says, then he'll make your life miserable." This was a teaching that Sam found unbelievable and personally irrelevant.

Tony is a 55 year old engineer who described himself as a "Catholic" and "moderately religious," attending church every five or six weeks. He read this Psalm in a similar way, identifying a key teaching, or fact. Tony did not write a comment on the text, but his answers in the related questionnaire and during our interview showed that he believed it taught "you cannot turn to god only when you are in despair as you will not receive any comfort." This response demonstrates that he had read this poem for information. Unlike Sam however, Tony did not describe this as an unbelievable and distasteful teaching, because of his sense of religious identity he believed this Psalm contained a warning for others, not him.

Derek identified as a non-practising Catholic and so "moderately religious" as well, but unlike Tony he had not been to church for years. Derek is a 62 year old welder and in line with his religious identity, he read this Psalm acceptingly, focusing on the parts with which he agreed. He did not annotate the text, but in the questionnaire he described this passage as promoting "the power of prayer." During our interview he suggested that this was a passage which encouraged perseverance in prayer:

You pray every week to win the lottery. In a roundabout way, you are trying to find something to get you that little bit better, but if it doesn't happen, well what do you do? Go in your shell and mope around? No you've just got to get back up and do it again, and start all over again.

Once again this poem is being read for information, demonstrated by the identifying of a central teaching which Derek affirmed.

Bob is a 61 year old part-time manager, who identified as "slightly religious," because he was neither overtly religious nor anti-religious. Initially I thought he had read this Psalm from a more imaginative and affective position. Although his annotations on this text were descriptive in nature often restating or summarizing sections of the poem and so did not clearly indicate how the poem had been read. In the accompanying questionnaire he wrote that "the fears in the passage are with us all to some degree," and "we all worry about our ultimate fate at the time of death/after death." These two comments raised the possibility that he had entered into the world of the poem, identifying with the psalmist and finding that it resonated with his own fears. However, when he spoke about this text in our interview he was very matter-of-fact, saying:

This is a person who perceives them self as a weak person who's sort of trying to plead his case with God, em, "Your terrors have paralysed me, they swirl around like flood waters", "darkness is my closest friend." So this is somebody in despair, they need some CBT counselling or something.

He did not suggest that this text had a "message" or instruction, but nonetheless, in this setting he read it factually, for information, distilling the poem into key elements which he responded to in a slightly mocking way.

The examples above give a flavour of the way in which most of the men read most of the texts, for information. As Figures 9, 10 and 11 show, when analysing the data I found that 83% of the annotations, 91% of the questionnaire responses and 75% of the texts discussed at interview indicated that the reader had attempted to read the text for information.

Figure 9: Annotation Content

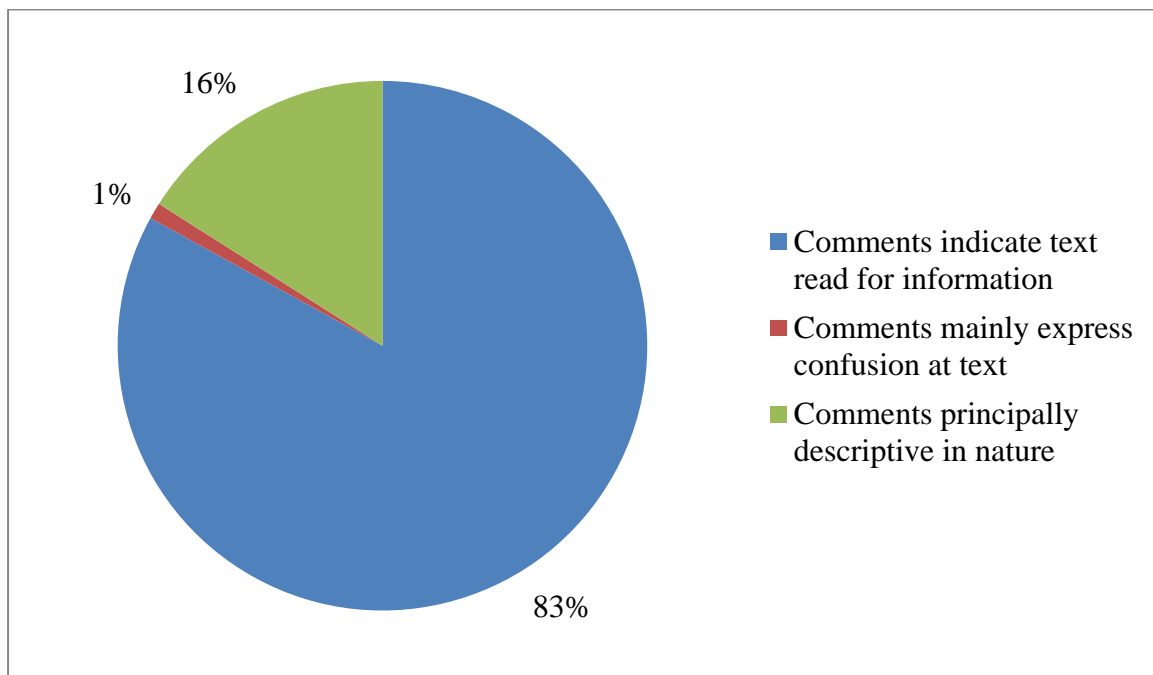


Figure 10: Questionnaire Content

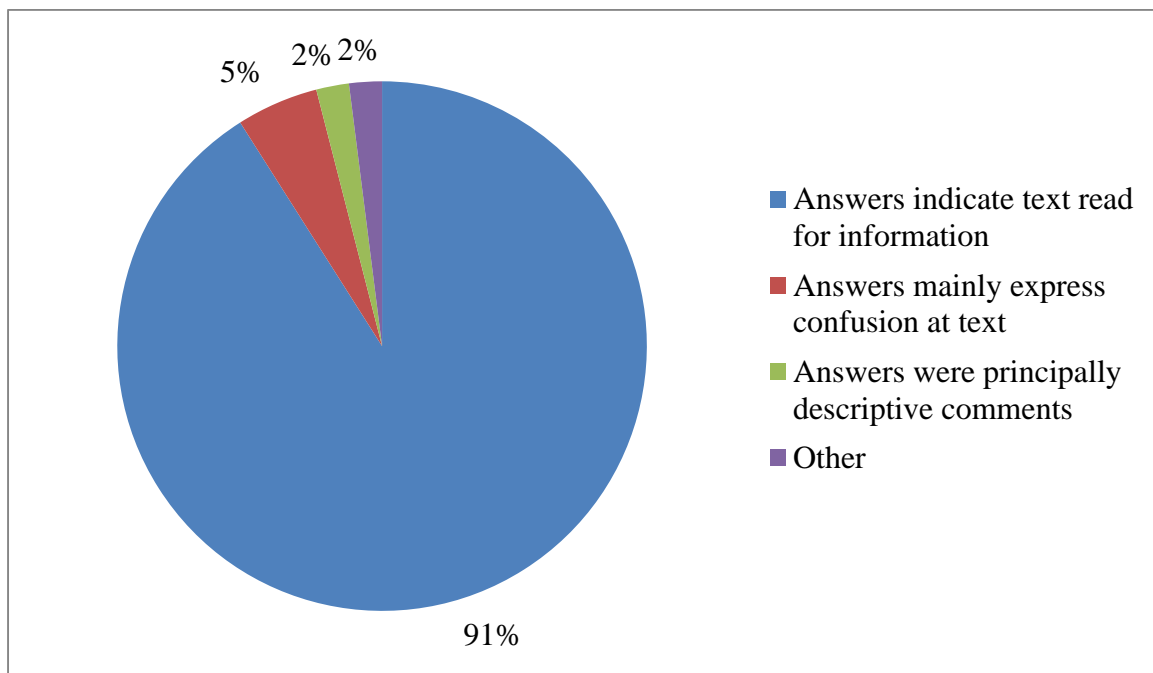
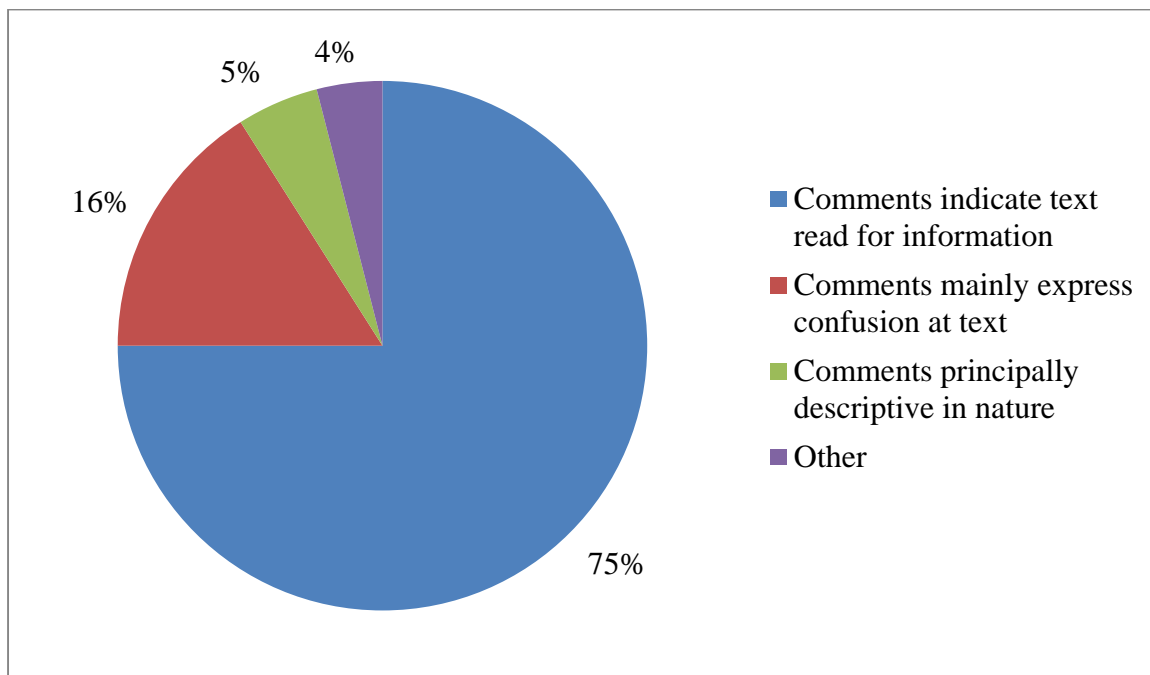


Figure 11: Interview Content



The comments, or answers, which did not indicate that the text was being read for information, were either descriptive in nature, with the participant restating or summarising part of the text or were expressions of confusion towards the text. For instance, Andy K is a 26 year old welder who identified as “not at all religious,” having never regularly read the Bible or attended church. Of the 20 men he was the only one who did not typically read most of the texts for information, instead when reading the texts he consistently expressed a sense of confusion towards them. Andy K did not annotate any text and in the five accompanying questionnaires confusion was explicitly expressed 21 times. For instance: when asked to write a one line summary of Proverbs 10:1-11 he wrote: “Out of my depth”; when asked what his “gut reaction” was to 2 Samuel 5:17-25 he wrote: “very confused. If I had read the whole Bible I could give a better answer, that’s how I feel”; and when asked there was anything worth remembering about Psalm 88 he indicated “no,” because he did “not fully understand what was going on.”

At interview he again expressed a sense of confusion towards all five texts. I was concerned that perhaps literacy was an issue and that even though I had chosen a Bible translation with a low reading level, Andy K may have struggled to read the texts. Thus I tentatively asked if he had difficulty reading other literature. He indicated that he did at times, but in this instance he

understood the content of the passages, his problem was that he could not place them within a wider framework so as to make sense of them.

I wonder if Andy K was not only struggling to place these texts within a wider biblical context, but actually did not know how to read them. Other participants described themselves as being unaware of a biblical framework or grand narrative (such as Mick, Victor, Peter, Sam, Zadok, Matty and John), but they did not express the same level of confusion as Andy K. It is possible that unlike them, he had not learnt how to read the biblical texts. The result of which was when asked about them he was able to describe their content to some degree, but found them all confusing.¹¹¹ Andy K was an exception however in general most of these men read most of the texts as if they were didactic texts. Reading in such a way that they focused on the content, facts, or teaching of each passage, critiquing and usually rejecting them as irrelevant, unworkable, unethical or unbelievable.

Rosenblatt's Effort/Aesthetic Spectrum

Certain literary theories resonate with this type of reading. For example, George Steiner's (1979) description of a reader as a "critic" has been applied to Bible reading (Fowler, 1985), and is one which has certain similarities with my participants' readings. Both they and Steiner's "critic" are concerned with analysing a text and forming a judgement about it, one they verbally expressed to others. However there are two reasons why Steiner's "critic" and his accompanying critic/reader model does not fit with the readings produced at the Plant. First, Steiner's "critic" distances themselves from the text in order to gain a better appreciation of it. He writes:

The motion of criticism is one of "stepping back from" in exactly the sense in which one steps back from a painting on a wall in order to perceive it better. But a good critic makes this motion conscious to himself [sic] and his [sic] public. (1979, p. 423)

¹¹¹ In the Entrance Questionnaire when asked to respond to 22 statements concerning the Bible, he ticked "do not know" on eight occasions and for the other 14 statements he generally indicated a mild, if qualified, acceptance of the Bible. However, his response to the same statements in the Exit Questionnaire shows a clear shift towards a general disregarding of the Bible. I brought this to Andy K's attention during our interview, and asked if he had any suggestions why this had occurred. He said: "Don't know, I might just have started, I don't know. I might just have got a different view after reading it." This implies that a consequence of finding that he could not make sense of the five texts, was a more sceptical view of the Bible.

This was not commonly seen in the readings at the Plant and those men who did step back, such as Gary, did so out of indifference rather than a desire to see the text more clearly. Second, Steiner's "critic" is one who "makes the tenor of his [sic] arbitrariness transparent" (Steiner, 1979, p. 427). In other words, they are aware of their own biases and the influence which this has upon their perception of the text, something they publicly disclose (pp. 428-429). Some of my participants, such as Dave and Victor, were aware of their own partiality and verbally acknowledged it. Others however, like Sam, were not. As the Introduction to my thesis shows, it was only when presented with his readings that Sam realised the influence of his preconceptions upon them. Therefore, although Steiner's description of a reader as a "critic" has certain overlaps with some of my own participants' readings, it does not fully describe them.

Another theory can be found in Paul Ricoeur's writings, for he describes the process of interpretation as a dialectic of "explanation" and "understanding" (Ricoeur, 1991, pp. 43-64). By "explanation" he means the analytical work of reading a text holding it at arms-length. This differs from "understanding" where the distance between the text and the reader is closed and meaning is personally appropriated. The Catholic feminist biblical scholar Sandra Schneiders builds on Ricoeur by suggesting that the Bible can be read for "information" or for "transformation." By this she means "to be intellectually enlightened or to be personally converted" (Schneider, 1999, p. 13). At first glance the labels "explanation" or "information" appear to correlate with my participants' readings for they too focused on the content of the text. However, these concepts, as used by Ricoeur and Schneiders, assume that the reader will learn through the reading of the text. Many of my participants however did not view their readings as learning experiences. When asked if there was anything worth remembering about the text, the 14 men who read sceptically said "no" on 63 out of 70 occasions (90%).¹¹²

These theories are not exhaustive and others also have a degree of overlap with my own findings (see: Britton, 1970; Pike, 2004; Langer 2011; Leland, Ociepka & Kuonen, 2012). In my case though, the terms which most accurately describe this aspect of the readings are Rosenblatt's "efferent" and "aesthetic" labels (1994, pp. 23-25). As I have recounted, Rosenblatt's transactional theory posits that as a reader approaches a text they prepare themselves to read it, guided by cues from the text, the wider context and their relationship

¹¹² The two men who read sceptically and acceptingly said "no" on 4 out of 10 occasions (40%) and the four men who read acceptingly said "no" on 4 out of 20 occasions (20%).

with the text (1994, pp. 23-25). In particular she describes an efferent/aesthetic spectrum which all readers situate themselves on as they prepare to read a text and remain on during the toing and froing of the reading transaction itself. This spectrum is one which educationalists have used when exploring reading (Karolides, 2000; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Kesler, 2012).

Where the reader places themselves on the spectrum shapes the way they read the text, and because it is the reader who positions themselves on the spectrum, the same text can be read in different ways (Rosenblatt, 1994, pp. 23-25). At one end of the spectrum is an “efferent reading stance,” which Rosenblatt describes as being “involved primarily with analysing, abstracting, and accumulating what will be retained after the reading” (1994, p.184). This reading stance is one which pays more attention to the “cognitive, the referential, the factual, the analytic, the logical, the quantitative aspects of meaning” (2005, p. 12). She gives the example of a mother, who, having found her child on the floor with an open bottle of pills, snatches the bottle away from the child and scans its label to see if the contents are harmful. The mother is reading efferently, her attention is focused on accumulating the appropriate information which will inform her subsequent actions (1994, pp. 23-24). Other examples of texts which would be read from an efferent standpoint include a train ticket, DIY manual, menu, newspaper or guide book. This was the stance which my participants adopted as they came to read the five biblical texts, as the examples at the start of this chapter demonstrate.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is an “aesthetic reading stance” which is “focused primarily on experiencing what is being evoked, lived through, during the reading” (1994, p. 184). This stance is focused on the present, on the reading event itself (1994, p. 24). For instance, the mother, who earlier snatched the bottle of pills from her child, may find herself curled up on the sofa lost in the latest novel. She is not reading to accumulate information which will inform her subsequent actions, rather she is reading for pleasure (Miller and Faircloth, 2009, p. 309).¹¹³ Rosenblatt writes:

¹¹³ Janice Radway and others (Pearce, 1977; Neal, 2006; Jacobs, 2011) have argued for the validity of reading for pleasure within the academic literary world (and at a popular level as well). This world was one which elevated a certain canon of texts above others and sought to uphold “its right to specify what constituted literary excellence” (Radway, 1997, p. 7). Accordingly, Radway explores women reading romance novels, texts which are not part of the academic literary canon, noting that their reading was not a simple activity rather it constituted a “complex intervention in the ongoing social life of actual social subjects” (1991, p. 7).

The aesthetic reader pays attention to-savors-the qualities of the feelings, ideas, situations, scenes, personalities, and emotions that are called forth and participates in the tensions, conflicts, and resolutions of the images, ideas, and scenes as they unfold. (2005, p. 11)

Rosenblatt's use of "aesthetic" to refer to a particular reading stance should not be confused with the appreciation or consideration of beauty or art. These definitions are not unconnected but they should be viewed as distinct. Examples of texts for which a reader would normally assume an aesthetic reading stance include a novel, poem, play or song.

Therefore, according to Rosenblatt's transactional theory, a poem/song like Psalm 88 should be read aesthetically. However it is the reader who chooses the reading stance and my participants did not read this poem/song from an aesthetic standpoint, seeking to live through and in the reading experience. They typically read it from an efferent stance, paying close attention to its content and logically evaluating it.¹¹⁴

The adoption of an efferent reading stance by these men is a further example of the way in which a reader's relationship with the five biblical texts shaped their reading of those texts. In this case I do not wish to focus on the role of their experiences, sense of religious identity or attitudes towards the Bible, but rather their beliefs. As the transactional theory hypothesizes, and their readings demonstrate, these beliefs shaped their reading of the texts. In particular, as I will show, their belief that the Bible is moral guide, resulted in them assuming an efferent standpoint as they came to read the texts.

Prior to examining the link between these men's beliefs and their readings, it should be noted that Rosenblatt's spectrum is not without its weaknesses. First, there is a discrepancy between Rosenblatt's theory and the reality of reading. She is careful to point out that the efferent/aesthetic spectrum is not a binary schema, but are two ends of a continuum and both aspects are found in every reading encounter (1994, p. 184). Not only that, but in one line of a text the reader may move between both ends of the spectrum as their attention changes from one part of the text to another. Typically though most readers assume a position somewhere close to the middle of the spectrum (1994, p. 37). However the examples which she provides

¹¹⁴ Psalm 88 was read from an aesthetic stance by one participant, Stewart, as is explored in Chapter 7.

are of an efferent or an aesthetic reading, there is no illustration of a reading from the middle ground or moving from one end of the spectrum to the other. In other words the theory refers to a spectrum, but the examples given by her suggest a binary. My case study mirrors her choice of examples, but stands against her theory, in that my participants did not tend to locate themselves in the middle of the spectrum nor was there any obvious movement between the two ends of the spectrum. Their readings were predominantly efferent in nature.

There are also certain genres or reading events which do not conform to, and are not suitably described by her efferent/aesthetic spectrum. For example, Eric Paulson and Sonya Armstrong (2009) argue that reading a piece of course work with the purpose of giving feedback to the student, is not suitably described by Rosenblatt's spectrum. They propose a three dimensional one, which takes into account the reader's and writer's stances. Cynthia Lewis (2000) modifies the spectrum by expanding its aesthetic component, and others have added a "critical stance" (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004), and an "expressive" one (Soter *et al.* 2010).

In my own case, I would argue that parables are a form of indirect communication and although there are a wide variety of biblical parables (Stein, 2000) typically they are understood to be stories or statements with two levels of meaning (Parker, 1996, pp. 28-48; Stein, 2000, p. 48; Snodgrass, 2008, p. 8). Therefore, they should be engaged with at the story or affective level and so require an aesthetic stance, but they are also read for information which may result in action, thus they should also be read from an efferent stance. I would contend that parables should be read fully aesthetically and fully efferently, an act which Rosenblatt's continuum does not allow. Of course the actual readings which take place may not correspond to these theoretical assumptions, and in my case all of my participants principally read Matthew 18:21-35 efferently. The purpose of my thesis though is to explore a series of readings, facilitated by Rosenblatt's theory, not to remodel or develop it. In light of the reading stance adopted by most of my participants and its correlation with Rosenblatt's "efferent" label, I will continue employing her efferent/aesthetic spectrum.

Three Antecedents to Reading Efferently

Being aware that a researcher and the research materials have the potential to "prime" a participant (Baron & Byren, 2000, p. 88), I reviewed the fieldwork concentrating on any

ways in which the men may have been led to assume an efferent standpoint. I also attempted to identify other influences which would have encouraged the adoption of such a stance. Three main factors were identified: the research materials guided the participants to assume such a stance; the readers' personalities and gender resulted in their reading the texts in this way; and the men's belief that the Bible was some sort of textbook or guide, resulted in them adopting an efferent stance. Ultimately I will argue that it was this third factor which principally resulted in the assumption of an efferent stance towards these texts.

The Influence of the Research Materials

Reflexivity involves "recognizing the extent to which your thoughts, actions and decisions shape how you research and what you see" (Mason, 2002, p. 5). One aspect of this is the way in which the research tools influence the data which emerges. Therefore I reviewed my materials for evidence that they influenced the men to assume an efferent reading stance and identified four things. First, the research material which contained the biblical texts was described as a "Manual." "Manual 1" contained Proverbs 10:1-11, "Manual 2" contained 2 Samuel 5:17-25 and so on. Second, four out of the five texts in some way lent themselves to an efferent reading stance (Proverbs 10:1-11, 2 Samuel 5:17-25, Matthew 18:21-35 and 2 John), and the first text any participant encountered was Proverbs 10:1-11. Third, in the questionnaire which accompanied each text, three of the questions could only be answered if an efferent stance was adopted, for example "What, if anything did you agree with in the passage?" Finally, in asking people to engage with these texts as part of a research project, they may have assumed an analytical posture.

However, even though the annotation and questionnaire was called a "Manual," verbally I referred to that component of the research as "the annotating part" and "the questionnaire part," and of the five texts, three lent themselves to an aesthetic reading stance (2 Samuel 5:17-25, Matthew 18:21-35 and Psalm 88). In the questionnaire, of the 14 questions asked 11 could be answered from an efferent or aesthetic standpoint, and during the interview the main question which I asked about the texts ("What did you make of that text?") was open to an efferent or aesthetic reading. Finally, although the participants were invited to take part in a research project, I tried to present the reading task in as open language as possible. Typically, before the participants were about to read a new text I would say:

Please remember, there are no right or wrong answers, I'm just interested in your take on all of this. Your opinions, thoughts, insights, feelings, ideas, memories, whatever, is what I'm interested in. And, an unannotated text is just as valuable as one full of comments. It's your response, whatever that is, that I'm interested in.

In this way I attempted to provide a setting where these men could engage with these texts in whatever way they wanted. The front sheet of the "Manual" emphasized this and it was verbally reiterated as well.¹¹⁵

Therefore the research methods did encourage an efferent reading of these texts but they did not inevitably cause the adoption of an efferent standpoint. Overall the research materials slightly favoured an efferent stance, but were open to both reading stances. More significant factors were the participants' personality and gender, and their beliefs about the Bible, as I will demonstrate.

The Influence of the Reader's Personality and Gender

Under the umbrella of contextual Bible reading, Leslie Francis and others have used Jungian personality theory as a matrix through which to explore the influence of a reader's personality on their reading of the Bible (Village & Francis, 2005; Francis, 2012; 2013). This approach is one which:

maintains that the reading and interpretation of text is shaped by individual preferences within the perceiving process (sensing and intuition) and within the evaluating process (thinking and feeling). (Francis, 2012, p. 873)¹¹⁶

Accordingly, a "thinker" is more likely to focus on "seeing what the text means in terms of evidence, moral principles or theology. They will be drawn to using rationality and logic to identify the ideas and truth-claims in a text" (Francis, 2013, p. 89). A "feeler" is more likely to focus on "applying the human dimensions to present day issues of compassion, harmony and trust. They will be drawn to empathizing with the characters in a narrative, and will want to understand their thoughts, motives and emotions" (Francis, 2013, pp. 88-89). When it comes to this evaluating process of personality a gender difference is noted, for it has been

¹¹⁵ See Appendix E for a copy of the fifth Manual.

¹¹⁶ This theory has also been applied to preachers and the preaching process (Francis & Village, 2008).

found that women are more likely to be “feelers” and men are more likely to be “thinkers” (Myers & Myers, 1995; Sorensen & Robinson, 1992; Kendall, 1998; Robbins & Francis, 2011).

Other scholars have found similar reading differences between men and women (Bleich, 1986; Flynn, 1986) and boys and girls (Rosen, 2001; Logan & Johnston, 2010) although they have not rooted this difference in personality theory. Özen Odağ (2013) reviews some of the quantitative and qualitative research in the area of reading and gender, concluding that men “claim to read much less emotionally, more rationally, and primarily for the purposes of broadening knowledge” (p. 858). Women on the other hand are considered to be “more emotional readers, as readers who become deeply engrossed by characters’ fates, and readers who retrieve a sense of pleasure and relaxation from reading” (p. 858).

Odağ is keen to point out that there are inconsistencies and weaknesses in this research field, for example many of the surveys ignore contextual factors which may exacerbate any gender difference (p. 859). In turn, her work investigates how the type of text read (either experience type texts or action type texts) impacts the emotional engagement of men and women readers. Although some differences are noted she concludes “the emotional responses of males and females during reading are highly dependent on (con)textual cues” (p. 856). The purpose of my thesis is not to explore any gender difference in reading and related socio-cultural factors which may contribute to this,¹¹⁷ for my study was not a comparison between men and women. Instead, I wish to point out the similarities between Rosenblatt’s “efferent,” Francis’s “thinker” and Odağ’s “male reader,” for all three terms describe a person who reads with a concern for information which is logically analysed and judged. Correspondingly, the labels “aesthetic,” “feeler” and “female reader” all describe a reader who is emotionally engaged with the text, concerned for the characters and the developing plot.¹¹⁸

This raises the possibility that the men in my study read the biblical texts from an efferent standpoint because of the influence of their personality and gender. This suggestion is further strengthened when taking into account these men’s normal reading practices. When my

¹¹⁷ See Rhoda Unger (1996) for a broader discussion on this subject, or Mary Crawford and Roger Chaffin (1986) who link the difference between men and women readers to schema theory, suggesting that a reader’s gender, as part of their schema, shaped the reading.

¹¹⁸ Importantly the work of Francis, Odağ, and Rosenblatt was all undertaken in a 20th and 21st Century Western context, the same context my participants find themselves in.

participants discussed their own reading habits, it was typically with reference to nonfiction such as newspapers, historical accounts or sports reports. For example Andy G, a 49 year old mechanic who identified as “moderately religious,” said “I don’t tend to read many storybooks; I’m more a reference book person. I like finding out how things work or what things are about, rather than stories.” This preference for nonfiction, fits the suggestion that men are more likely to read efferently and corresponds with other research indicating that men are more inclined to read nonfiction than women (Summers, 2013; Hartley, 2001, pp. 25-71). Furthermore, the typical reading material found in these men’s offices and staff rooms were handbooks, manuals, protocols and so on, which would also have reinforced the naturalness of an efferent stance. This mirrors Alison Peden’s (2005) thought that the experience of close reading legal documents resulted in the women prisoners also undertaking a thorough close reading of the Bible passages during their CBS sessions.

Therefore my participants’ adoption of an efferent stance could be due to their personality and gender, corresponding with their choice of nonfictional literature and reading context. However, there is a final and more compelling reason why the participants adopted an efferent stance, for the data shows that before being given the first text most of the men had decided what reading standpoint was required.

The Influence of the Men’s Beliefs

One of the preparatory tasks the participants had to complete was an Entrance Questionnaire containing the question: “In your own words, what is the Bible?”¹¹⁹ In their replies to this question, 16 participants indicated that the Bible was a guide or textbook, in other words a text which should be read efferently. For instance, Phil, a 48 year old electrician, who identified as “slightly religious,” because he did not disbelieve in God, described it as “a book containing an organisation’s beliefs.”

John the 22 year old manager who identified as an atheist wrote:

“The Bible is a guide to Christians about how they should go about their lives.”

Similarly Sam referred to it as:

“A book for Christians containing god’s teachings and lessons.”

¹¹⁹ See appendix C for a copy of the questionnaire

Derek, a 62 year old welder and non-practising Catholic, wrote:

“What you yourself base your life and your children’s upbringing, in the scope of religion.”

Some men did refer to the Bible as a storybook, but one with a didactic purpose, for instance Dave the scaffolder who I presented in Chapter 4 described it as “A collection of accounts and stories of times past, rearranged to suit religious groups.”

Peter, a 56 year old electrician who identified as “not at all religious” wrote:

“A book of stories and interpretations of how we should behave.”

So too Tony, a 55 year old engineer and Catholic, referred to it as:

“A collection of stories that have an ethical and moral message about how we should conduct ourselves in relation to our interactions with or fellow human beings.”

There were four men (Gary, Zadok, Richie and Mick) who responded by suggesting that the Bible is a story, implying that it should be read from an aesthetic stance. For instance, Zadok, a 59 year old utility technician who identified as “not at all religious,” simply wrote: “A collection of stories.” Mick, a 30 year old scaffolder who identified as “not at all religious” described it as “A storybook.” However, no difference was noted between these four men’s readings and the readings of the other 16 men who described the Bible in efferent terms. One possible reason for this could be that by referring to the Bible as a story they understood it to be a story with a teaching, or message, which should be followed. The data therefore is not overwhelming. However it does indicate that the majority of the men believed that the Bible was some sort of didactic text. This was their view prior to reading any of the five texts, and with that belief in place an efferent standpoint would be expected as they came to read the texts.

These findings tie in with other contemporary research. The 2012 Theos report *Post-Religious Britain?: The Faith of the Faithless* found that the largest cohort of those sampled indicated that the Bible was “a useful book of guidance and advice for our lives but not the Word of God” (Theos, 2012, p. 21). Alan Le Grys reached a similar conclusion:

The empirical data gathered for this study from interviews and churches across the Medway region suggests that the Bible is overwhelmingly regarded as a moral and doctrinal handbook. (2010, p. 132)

This echoed earlier findings by Nick Spencer and Yvonne Richmond who analysed 60 interviews of non-church goers discussing various subjects including the Bible (Spencer, 2005, pp. 143-145). They found that the Bible was often viewed as an advice or rule book, albeit which was unreliable.¹²⁰ Matthew Engelke undertook ethnographic research with the British and Foreign Bible Society and noted their desire for the Bible to be de-manualized.¹²¹ He describes the Bible Society staff reflecting on the findings from some focus groups:

One of these had been with young, unchurched parents, some of whom suggested that perhaps the Bible's moral guidelines could be used to help raise well-behaved children. Despite the good intentions, this kind of sentiment always worried members of the team. It stripped the Bible of its full meaning. It was a disembodiment and objectification of the very incarnation that defines the Christian message. "How do we get away from using the Bible as a manual?" Ann asked. (2013, p. 23)

All these examples demonstrate that my participants' belief that the Bible is a textbook resonates with the conclusions others have drawn.¹²² Rosenblatt herself suggests that religious texts, such as the Bible, are "read mainly efferently" (1994, p. 36).¹²³

I would argue that this was the most significant reason for the men reading the texts efferently for the studies noted above imply that gender was not a contributing factor. While other studies have shown gender to inform certain beliefs about the Bible, for example

¹²⁰ Spencer recounts how there were three common views of the Bible. First that it is an advice or rulebook, second that it is a biography or history book, and third that it is a story book, akin to a fairy tale. These views were often accompanied by the beliefs that the Bible was untrue and unreliable (2005, pp.143-145).

¹²¹ Bob Ekblad suggests something similar when he argues against "the common tendency to come to the text looking for information about what we think we are supposed to do to be obedient-compliant with God's perceived demands" (2005, p. 2).

¹²² This view of the Bible has been noted in other contexts as well. Reflecting on a North American setting Timothy Beal writes: "This idea of the Bible as a divine manual for finding happiness with God in this world and salvation in the next is so familiar to us today that we might assume it's been around forever" (2010, p. 170). It also corresponds well to research amongst the British public which noted that a popular view of Jesus is that of a "moral teacher" or "good man" (Spencer, 2005; Bissett, 2013).

¹²³ She adds that they could be experienced as works of art "under different conditions or by people with different urgencies" (1994, p. 36).

women are more likely to believe the Bible is true compared with men (Field, 2014), both Spencer (2005) and Le Grys (2010) quote male and female participants to evidence their findings. This implies that the gender of these participants did not play a role in forming this view of the Bible. So too, Engelke's comment suggests that there was no gender distinction. Of course it could be that these researchers did not analyse their data with an eye to gender difference. However, with qualitative research (as Le Grys and Spencer undertook) the data produced guides the analysis, so if the data showed a gender distinction then the researcher has the opportunity to note it. The use of both male and female participants to evidence their arguments suggests that a gender distinction was not noted and so may not have existed.

Therefore, in the reading transactions which took place at the Chemical Plant, most of the men assumed an efferent stance as they prepared to read the five biblical texts, they did this principally because they believed that the Bible is a didactic text. Other factors such as personality, gender or the research methods themselves would have corroborated this belief, in as much as they worked with such a belief rather than against it.

Reading Transformative Texts

The second belief to emerge from my data concerned the transformative potential of the five biblical texts and by implication the Bible. Throughout this section I will use the terms "transformative" and "transformative potential" to denote a shift towards the Christian faith because this was the type of transformation which many of my participants anticipated. Earlier in this thesis I made mention of liberation theology and in particular its connection to contextual Bible reading practices.¹²⁴ Within this stream of Christian theology, Bible reading is viewed as a liberating and transformative act. For example, *Conversations*, a CBS guide produced by the Scottish Bible Society and The Contextual Bible Study Group, lists various principles which undergird CBS. The first is "belief in the liberating and transforming power of God's Word in the Scriptures and in people's lives" (n.d., p. 11), and accordingly Louise Lawrence refers to CBS as a "transformative ritual" (2009, pp.122-123). Advocates of contextual Bible reading are well aware of its role in the oppression of people but understand that this need not be the case. Carlos Mesters reflecting on Bible reading amongst the poor in Brazil describes the use of the Bible as "the source of their freedom in the face of the abuses of power" (1989, p. viii).

¹²⁴ See Chapter 1.

The idea that the Bible is transformative is not only found in liberation theology, but throughout different expressions of the Christian Church, for Christians view the Bible as, in some way, the Word of God. A privileged location where God can be encountered (Schneiders, 1999; 2003; Volf, 2010, p. 34). This in turn means that many Christians view the Bible as a transformative text, one which they seek to reflect on and critically submit to (Wink, 2010 [1973]; Rowland & Vincent, 2001; Smallbones, 2007; Hoggarth, 2011). Accompanying this belief in the Bible are stories recounting its agency-like qualities, for example, “falling open to a particular chapter and verse to exactly what a given reader needs to hear” (Engelke, 2013, p. xv). This can be seen in the 2011 Bible reading initiative *Biblefresh* which encouraged British Christians to consider the question, “How has the Bible changed your world?” (“The Bible changed my life,” 2010).

Much of what has been noted above concerns the Church’s view of the Bible as a transformative text in the life of the Christian. However a similar expectation exists of those outside of the Church. There is a popular opinion within Christianity that if a nonreligious person were to read the Bible they may find themselves positively changed by the experience. For example, Biblica, who work globally in Bible translating, publishing and engagement, say:

Our **MISSION** is to transform lives through God’s word. Our **VISION** is to see the work of Biblica complete when every person in the world is given an opportunity to encounter Jesus Christ through God’s Word and be transformed.
(Biblica, n.d, emphasis in original)

This is not a belief that if such a person were to simply read the Bible they would suddenly become a Christian, rather it would be a positive experience for them and may play a part in their conversion to Christianity. Robert Detweiler, perhaps reflecting on his experience in the USA noted:

One can observe in evangelical Christianity sacred texts functioning simultaneously as directly and indirectly life-transforming. The New Testament, especially the gospels, is held to contain the formula for redemption (consisting of, minimally, an expression of contrition for one’s sins and of belief in a

“personal” savior), but it also is sometimes treated as if it possesses near-magical properties: if only persons could be persuaded to read it, the very encounter with the words would change their lives. (1985, p. 221)

The organisers of a recent English biblical literacy project express a similar sentiment when they state that the “Bible can awaken faith and bring life” (*Let The Bible Live: Report of the North Yorkshire Dales Biblical Literacy Project*, 2013, p. 8). This belief results in British churches and para-church organisations undertaking “Gospel drops,” where they distribute copies of a Gospel (or the entire New Testament) to members of their wider community, in the hope that these people will read it and be changed. Entire organisations, such as the Gideons International, exist to provide those who have not read the Bible with “the opportunity to read it for themselves, perhaps for the first time, and to discover God in a personal way” (Gideons, n.d.).¹²⁵ Engelke sums up this sentiment when noting the British and Foreign Bible Society’s commitment to providing Bibles without note or comment. He writes:

Certainly the early Victorian missionary age was characterized by a faith in the Bible’s ability to speak for itself, to stand free from history and transmit universal meanings. This understanding of the Bible’s agency is still central to the Bible Society movement’s ideology of dissemination. (2013, pp. 4-5).

Such a belief was noted back in the 1500s amongst those who translated the Bible: Iona Hine notes how Miles Coverdale hoped that the English translation of the Bible would result “with people worshipping God, but also be to the good of England’s earthly kingdom” (2015, p. 52).

This belief in the transformative potential of the Bible is reaffirmed by various testimonies of its impact upon people’s lives. Organisations concerned with Bible translation (for instance Wycliffe Bible Translators) and distribution (such as Gideons International or the Bible Society) regularly publish stories highlighting the significance of Bible reading in the lives of individuals and communities. For instance, one of the reports on the United Bible Society’s

¹²⁵ Often the Gospels or Bibles which are distributed have various apparatus to aid the reader. For example, Gideon Bibles have an index of subjects to help the reader find a passage dealing with a topic they are interested in and some Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF) Gospels have questions embedded into the text, or space for the reader to write down their own reflections.

website is entitled '*God's Word changed my life,*' says former street kid, and concerns Groum Pale whose life story "is testament to the restorative and healing power of God's Word and the love shown towards him by Christians" (Smith, 2014, n.p.).

Not everyone agrees with this view of the Bible as a transformative book in the West. Fergus Macdonald, reflecting on the difference between the southern and northern hemispheres, writes:

The Word of God, which for the writer to the Hebrews and today's Christians in the younger churches of the South is 'alive and active,' appears to be comatose and silent in the churches of the western world. (2009, p. 193)

With reference to the Bible's place in western society and the significance of the concept of "canon" for biblical meaning, George Aichele writes:

The biblical canon plays a significant diminished role in the contemporary world. It is arguable that the Bible no longer has any genuine canonical hold over anyone today, no matter how loudly some people might protest. (2001, p. 221)

This sentiment is also reflected by those who note the decline in the role of the Bible in British life (Field, 2014; Vincent, 2012; Pietersen, 2011).¹²⁶ None of the participants in my research regularly read the Bible, and most did not believe it was true or divinely inspired. However, as I will go on to highlight, they read the texts as if they had a transformative potential, but one they were able to neutralise.

Reading Sceptically

Of the 20 men, 14 read most of the texts sceptically, as Chapter 5 highlighted, and a variety of different approaches were undertaken in these readings. Some men focused on parts of the text which they viewed as inappropriately absolutist, for example Mick, a 30 year old scaffolder who identified as "not at all religious" described Proverbs 10:1-11 as:

¹²⁶ Similarly, Jione Havea reflects upon his context of Oceania and suggests that "the Bible is going stale in Oceania" (2014, p. 4)

Rules of how you should behave or this, or that, would happen to you. And for me that's, that's not for everyone, if you know what I mean. It's not, em. It shouldn't be taken as black and white things, you know what I mean? There's a lot of different, em, permutations about how things can pan out.

Matty, a 36 year old scaffolder who identified as "not at all religious," rejected 2 Samuel 5:17-25 on ethical grounds and because of the God presented in it:

If he's supposed to be a peaceful forgiving person, then striking people down in raging enemies in floods. It just, it just speaks anger, the words speak anger to me. And that sort of, for what's supposed to be a loving helpful book, it just annoys, like. It looks like a war passage to me, for a tactical war.

For Zadok, a 59 year old utility technician who identified as "not at all religious," the directive to forgive in Matthew 18:21-35 was unworkable. He said:

How often should you forgive someone? If they keep causing you grief, you just try and avoid them or whatever you do. You can't just sit there and keep forgiving them, can you?

Peter, a 56 year old electrician who identified as "not at all religious," described Psalm 88 as a "bullying" text and went on to say:

You know, and that to me, I thought that was more, somebody who was to read that who was ill, terminally ill or something, I'd think that would be more frightening than anything else, and I didn't like it, I didn't like it at all.

And Phil, a 48 year old "slightly religious" electrician noted that 2 John contradicted previous texts:

You know some passages will say "help and protect your fellow man," and then the next thing says "well if he doesn't really agree with what you mean, or what we say leave him alone."

The two previous chapters have highlighted some of reasons for the sceptical readings which occurred. However, when asked, some of the men were unsure as to why they had read as they did. Zadok for instance, a 59 year old utility technician said: “Whilst I’m reading, I don’t know why I do it, I’m looking for faults in it. Now that’s, now that’s myself, why do I look for faults in it? I don’t know.”

Therefore, I also approached this subject indirectly asking why they thought I had difficulty in getting men to participate in the project. Such an approach is common amongst researchers examining a subject where the participants’ may feel a degree of uncertainty or social pressure to conform to a certain view (Oppenheim, 1992, p. 210). Mick’s response was typical of most of the men: “Maybe, maybe they are just scared of religion or something. Or scared that it’s going to be pushed, thrust in their face and, like, sort of be a little bit overbearing with it.” The main reason given for people refusing to participate was “fear” that there would be an attempt to convert them. Another common answer given was that religion carried a “stigma” as did a religious icon like the Bible and by taking part they too would be stigmatised, phenomenon that others have also noted (Spencer, 2003; Hay & Hunt, 2000, p. 24).

However, the men indicated that although others may have felt that way and so refused to take part, they did not have any of those concerns. This though may reflect the participants’ mind-sets at the end of the project rather than the start. On one occasion a group of men closed the door to their office before they began to engage with the first text, I assume so that colleagues would be discouraged from walking in and seeing what was going on. Interestingly, by the time it came to reading the third text they no longer closed the door and it remained open for the rest of the project.¹²⁷ These actions may reflect the stigma which is attached to reading the Bible.

When analysing the content of the interviews and the closing comments in the questionnaires I found that 11 of the 14 the men who read sceptically indicated they believed that the text, or the wider project, would try to influence or convert them. For example, Matty is a 36 year old scaffolder who identified as “not at all religious,” viewed the Bible as an authority which was

¹²⁷ For further discussion on the role of stigma and identity, see Major and O’Brien (2005).

seeking to impose its order upon him. He described the Bible as a “controlling mechanism” and a “dictator” before going on to compare it to the North Korean leader:

It’s more in the comments of: “you must do this or you’ll be punished,” “If you don’t do as I say you’ll be punished.” And that is going back to likes of, as you, North and South Korea. If you don’t do what they tell and you don’t, then that, I mean you look at North Korea now. Is it the one? Is it the North or the South? The one that’s got that leader and if you don’t believe in him, and he’s supposed to be almighty God, and he’s supposed to be their. And it’s just to me another form of that.

Matty assumed that the Bible had an agenda, one which involved it acting as a “dictator.” He went on to ask if I had purposely chosen controversial texts and was surprised to hear that I had selected texts which I considered not to be overly provocative. I went on to add that I had also chosen texts which were not concerned with proselytising. He responded: “I was kind of surprised actually, because I expected more of that to be honest.” Matty’s comment shows that he assumed he would be evangelised and that the texts, and/or my project, would attempt to convert him.

Ethan, a 40 year old engineer, when asked if he had any extra comments he would like to make regarding 2 John, wrote: “At times the passage almost felt like it tried too hard to want people to believe.” Sam, suggested that the Bible’s purpose was “getting people to behave” a certain way, “controlling people I suppose and guiding people.” John, whose atheist identity shaped his reading, believed that the Bible tried to convince people of God’s existence. He said “I’ve not read the Bible cover to cover, but the general gist is it’s always trying to force it down your throat: Jesus does exist; God does exist.” Zadok the 59 year old nonreligious utility technician, was asked if the five biblical texts had reaffirmed any kind of pre-existing expectations? He said: “No I’ve not moved [...] I haven’t moved one way or the other.” His reply demonstrates that one of his expectations was that reading the texts would result in an attempt to “move” him in a certain direction. In other words, the texts’ agenda was to lead him towards, I would suggest, a more accepting view of Christianity. These comments resonate with both the central assertion that fear of conversion was the main reason people refused to take part and with the finding that most of the men viewed the Bible as a textbook or guide. This leads me to conclude that a large number of my participants assumed my

research and in particular the texts they would read, would try to influence them in some way or other. Even though most of the men indicated that they did not believe the Bible was true or divine, their responses show that they believed reading these texts had a transformative potential.

The role of the researcher must also be considered in these sceptical readings. In Chapter 3 I reflected in detail on my own position within this research. What follows is an account of the main occasion when I understand that my presence influenced the sceptical nature of these readings. Some of the participants assumed I was “religious.” On one occasion when I was introducing myself to a new group of men, one of them said “are you that religious guy that’s doing research?” This implies there was probably a popular view in the Chemical Plant that a “religious guy” was undertaking research. Although it was my practice not to disclose my own religious views prior to or during the research, the assumption existed that I was “religious.” However, there was a degree of uncertainty regarding my religious identity and motivation. I presented myself as a researcher involved in a secular, if unusual, piece of research. This was a university based piece of work and part of a degree awarding process. One participant even suggested that I might be an “atheist” and the question which I was most often asked at the end of the interview concerned my own religious identity. So the assumption that I was “religious” was probably there, but it was a loose one. Of course, the participants were correct in labelling me “religious,” so although I attempted to relate to them as a researcher my manner may have communicated something of this religious identity, in a way that I was unaware.

The label “religious,” as the men pointed out, is one which carries a stigma and possibly the expectation that I was seeking to convert people to “religion.” This in turn may well have added to the men reading the texts sceptically. Tony expressed this particularly clearly. He is a 55 year old engineer who identified as “slightly religious” describing himself as a “Catholic.” He was not a sceptical reader, but when discussing why some men refused to take part in the project. He said:

I think it is, there is an element of, I always dislike having, em, eh, the Jehovah’s Witnesses coming to my door. So I think there’s an element of fear. And, is this person going to try to turn me into something, or influence me?

Not only were the texts deemed to be a possible threat, but so was I and these two beliefs reinforced each other. Carl Tighe (Hine *et al.* 2011) noted something similar when using the Bible in a creative writing class. His students were extremely nervous assuming that he was “trying to teach religion or to ‘convert’ them to something” (p. 191). David Wood reported something similar when he was the facilitating a biblical literacy project in the Northern England, part of which attempted to engage those who did not attend church regularly with the Bible. He “often sensed a distrust, a feeling that there was a hidden agenda, that the project was really a form of covert evangelism, whose real aim was to bring people back to church!” (“Let The Bible Live: Report of the North Yorkshire Dales Biblical Literacy Project,” 2013, p. 39). To this end, the most notable reaction I received at the Chemical Plant involved a worker who identified as a “militant atheist” and had heard that I was looking for volunteers for a Bible reading project. As I walked into the staff room he and two other colleagues shared, he walked out indicating that he wanted nothing to do with the project.

In Tighe’s case and in mine, this “fear” or nervousness passed. My growing friendship with the participants and lack of attempt to proselytise dispelled the perception that I and this project were attempting to coerce these men to convert. Tony went on to say:

But when people meet you then, on a one-to-one basis, they realise there’s nothing particularly sinister to this at all. And actually you are not asking for people to, you know, come to church.

This was also the case for the worker who described himself as a “militant atheist,” although he never took part in the project we ended up establishing a good rapport and he would later facilitate my entry into another group of men.

Counter-Reading

When considering the sceptical readings which took place in light of the participants’ belief that the Bible had an agenda to influence and/or convert them, a belief reinforced by my presence. I would argue that these men read the texts in such a way as to disempower the perceived transformative potential of the texts, something I describe as “counter-reading.” This is a reading style emanating from a reader’s personal response to an assumed threat which is posed by a text’s assumed transformative potential. This response can be seen in a

sceptical reading of a text and often in its accompanying rejection. By highlighting the errors, inconsistencies, contradictions, poor ethics, irrelevances or unworkability a reader has demonstrated that the text and its claims are invalid. This results in the neutralising of the threat possessed by the text's transformative potential.¹²⁸

Counter-reading is similar to a "resisting reading" (Fetterley, 1978; Braun, 1990; Harding, 2006) or "reading against the grain" (Domeris, 1991; Clines, 1995; West, 2004). These also assume that the text has a particular ideology, worldview or agenda, which the reader is seeking to highlight, challenge and perhaps provide an alternative to. Such readings often identify with the phrase "hermeneutics of suspicion," to express a distrust of the biblical text (Fiorenza, 1984; Aichele *et al.*, 1995, pp. 272-308; Volf, 2010). Significantly though, the terms "resisting readers" and "reading against the grain" are not used to refer to the reader's personal defensive response but to a wider impersonal ideological engagement with a the text. For example, Judith Fetterley's *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* considers eight texts through a feminist lens. In her introduction she explains the need for resisting readers and describes the foundation of her book in this way:

It is based on the premise that we read and that what we read affects us-drenches us, to use Rich's language, in its assumptions, and that to avoid drowning in this drench of assumptions we must learn to re-read. Thus, I see my book as a self-defense survival manual for the woman reader lost in "the masculine wilderness of the American novel." (1978, p. viii)

Although this preface acknowledges the individual reader in the reading event, Fetterley goes on to undertake a broad impersonal feminist critique of four short stories and four novels, rather than articulating the personal threat which she hints at in the preface. In Fetterley's case a resisting reader refers to an impersonal ideological reading of a text.

Likewise, David Clines in a chapter entitled "God in the Pentateuch: Reading against the Grain," notes that:

¹²⁸ This sense of threat and subsequent defensive response on the part of the reader are different to the defensive stage in Normand Holland's psychoanalytical literary theory DEFT (defence, expectation, fantasy and transformation). In Holland's case, the defensive response is connected to the reader's identity theme, something that developed in them from their earliest infancy (Holland, 1973; 1980b; 2011).

Reading against the grain implies that there *is* a grain. It implies that texts have designs on their readers and wish to persuade them of something or other. It implies that there are ideologies inscribed in texts, and that the readers implied by texts share the texts' ideologies. But, as I have suggested earlier, readers are free to resist the ideologies of the texts. (1995, pp. 206-207, emphasis in original)

In his case, reading against the grain is synonymous with ideological criticism.¹²⁹ He ignores the reader's personal sense of threat or distaste while reading and the resulting defensive response which that may elicit. Clines mirrors Fetterley by equating, in his case, reading against the grain with an impersonal ideological critical reading.¹³⁰

Willi Braun comes close to incorporating a reader's personal sense of threat attached to a text or reading transaction, when he refers to a "defensive reader" (1990). However, in his case he is referring to a reader's awareness of the negative impact which a text has had in other times and places, and to that end he refers to the "menace of the gospel text itself" (1990, p. 63). For instance, with reference to John's gospel he notes:

The less than glorious historical effect of the Fourth Gospel's closed ideology, an effect that has turned victims of John's irony into real victims of Christian anti-Semitism and has fostered a hatred for "the world" as the inevitable shadow side of the gospel's justly celebrated promotion of love for members of the in-group. (p. 63)

Although Braun is highlighting a reader's personal sense of displeasure, this is attached to the historical legacy of the text, rather than the sense of threat which that text poses to the immediate reader. He is not alone in this critique, for it is one which feminist and post-colonial critics have made. For instance, part of the interpretive method adopted by Elisabeth

¹²⁹ Clines disagrees that texts intrinsically have grains or ideologies, rather he argues the grain/ideology is the agreed meaning or practice of an interpretive community. Nonetheless because people make reference to texts as having grains/ideologies he continues to use that language (1995, p. 207).

¹³⁰ Some scholars (Wurst, 1999; Britt, 2007; Alaghbari, 2013) have used the term "counter-reading" synonymously with ideological criticism, reading against the grain or being a resisting reader. For example, Mieke Bal's (1989) edited collection *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible* could be described as a series of readings utilizing feminist criticism. What is missing is any significant focus on the nature of the personal response from each of the authors. This collection is an example of an impersonal ideological critique of various texts from the Hebrew Bible and is not an example of counter-reading, as I am using the term.

Schüssler Fiorenza and other contributors to *Searching the Scriptures* is one which identifies the crime of “patriarchal murder and oppression” by “carefully tracing its clues and imprints in the texts in order to prevent further hurt and violations” (Fiorenza, 1993, p. 11).

By using the term “counter-reading” I am capturing a reading style emanating from a reader’s personal response to an assumed threat, which is posed by a text’s assumed transformative potential. The act of counter-reading demonstrates that these readers viewed the reading event as potentially transformative, something they opposed. This belief that the Bible has a transformative potential and that reading the biblical texts could change a person, appears to contradict most of my participants’ view that the Bible is neither divinely inspired nor true. Rosenblatt writes, “our attitudes may be clarified either by a violent reaction against what we have read or by assimilation of it” (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 41). In my case, the participants’ beliefs about the Bible were brought to the surface as they came to read the texts.

There are three reasons why these men had an underlying belief in the Bible’s transformative potential and so too the five biblical texts. First, if something is read efferently the reader expects themselves to be informed and led by the text. These men assumed that the Bible, as a guidebook or manual, would inform and lead them, something they sought to resist by counter-reading. Second, as Robert Detweiler (1985) points out, even a nonbeliever would treat a sacred text from their heritage with respect, and such texts are viewed as transformative with a response expected from the reader. The Bible is still viewed as a sacred text by Christians, the largest religious group in Britain,¹³¹ and historically it was a source of authority influencing much of Britain’s past and present culture (Campbell, 2010; Crystal, 2010, Bragg, 2011).¹³² The echoes of that legacy are seen in present day British society, where biblical images or tropes are used widely within our culture (Crossley, 2014; 2015; Edwards, 2015), for instance Katie Edwards traces the use and portrayal of Eve in contemporary advertising (2012). My participants’ counter-readings are another example of

¹³¹ In the 2011 Census of England and Wales 59% identified as Christian, 25% as having “no religion,” 7% did not state their religion, 5% identified as Muslim and 4% identified with other religions (Office of National Statistics, 2012). Possibly due to the type of question asked or the nature of the survey, the 2012 British Social Attitudes survey recorded a much higher number of people identifying with no religion (48%), with 46% identifying as Christian and 6% with another religion (<http://www.bsa-data.natcen.ac.uk/>). In both surveys Christianity was the largest religious group.

¹³² In a North American context, Timothy Beal identifies six iconic cultural attributes of the Bible. The first is its authoritative status: “It means authoritative. A book called “the Bible” is the ultimate authority. It is the alpha and omega, first and last Word on the subject.” (2010, p. 169). The other five attributes are: univocal, practical, accessible, comprehensive and exclusive.

this legacy. Third, the participants' assumption that I was a "religious guy" and that I too was involved in this attempt to convert them to religion, would have reinforced the belief that these readings had the potential to change them.

There was a small group of four men who read the texts in a more accepting fashion, tending to focus on aspects of the text with which they agreed. These men, along with Bob who identified as "slightly religious" and read both sceptically and acceptingly, had similar beliefs to the sceptical readers regarding the transformative potential of the texts. However, the belief that these texts were seeking to convert or direct them to live in a certain way was not perceived as a threat. They already viewed themselves as "religious," to some degree. So although they were not regular churchgoers and did not read the texts uncritically, ultimately they made the same assumptions as the other participants but identified with the texts rather than against them. One of exceptions to this was Victor, the scaffolder whom I considered in the previous chapter. He identified as "not at all religious" and yet his responses to the texts contained no sense of threat, expectation of coercion, or attempt to counter-read. I wonder if his decision to give "it a chance" resulted in an openness to the Bible's status as a sacred text. Victor would sum up his readings of the five biblical texts with the phrase: "I don't know if it's true or not, or w[h]at to believe." This was not an expression of confusion or frustration, rather having attempted to read the texts fairly, he had not reached a conclusion regarding his view of the Bible.

Therefore, as most of these participants approached these texts, they focused on a particular belief about the Bible which would shape the subsequent reading transactions. They believed there was the possibility that they would be impacted by reading the Bible, and many of them felt unsafe because of this. This sense of threat was reinforced by the assumption that I had a similar agenda, and so the majority responded to this by counter-reading.

This troubles the opinion expressed by George Aichele (2001, p. 221) and Ray Vincent (2012), that the Bible is no longer treated as a book with authority in western societies, a conclusion easily reached in light of the decline in belief in, and use of, the Bible (Field, 2014). Although none of these men read the Bible regularly and most of them indicated that they did not believe it to be true or divinely inspired, when it came to reading it, they read it as if it were a sacred text, one capable of transforming them. This suggests that they, to some degree, believe in the agency-like qualities of the Bible to which Christianity adheres.

The act of counter-reading also troubles the assumption that Bible reading is always a transformative experience, for in this case these readers were able to disarm the transformative potential which they sensed. With the exception of Dave's cathartic reading experience and Stewart's reading of Psalm 88 (which is examined in chapter 7) none of the men who identified as "not at all religious" indicated that their readings had been transformative. I compared their responses to the 22 statements about the Bible in the Entrance and Exit Questionnaires, and asked them directly in the Exit Questionnaire if they had been affected positively and/or negatively by reading the five passages?¹³³ In the interviews I also considered this, but assuming a more indirect approach, asking if they had been surprised by the texts? There was very little difference between their Entrance and Exit responses to the 22 statements, and in the Exit Questionnaire and interview the men typically suggested that their views on religion or the Bible remained unchanged. Gary, whom I presented in Chapter 4, when asked if these readings had affected him said "I am set in my ways." In other words, he had not changed. Zadok reflected on his readings and wrote, "I don't think I've been swayed one way or the other." Bob too remained unchanged, "it's been good to have read these texts," he wrote, "but they do not change my views as the words of man are often attributed to God." Other participants indicated they had moved further away from belief in God or the Bible. For example, Matty, a 36 year old nonreligious scaffolder, would describe the effects of reading the five texts as having "pushed me more away from the Bible." So too John, whom I considered in Chapter 5, found that reading the texts had "reaffirmed" his atheist identity and beliefs.

Christian scholars have reflected on their belief in the agency-like qualities of the Bible, and yet the ability for people to read it and find that in doing so they are not drawn towards the Christian faith.¹³⁴ Miroslav Volf focuses upon the reader's personal resistance towards the Bible, suggesting:

We are modern men and women, individuals standing on our own two feet, masters and mistresses of our own choices and destinies – or so we think. For

¹³³ See Appendix D and H.

¹³⁴ There are, of course, examples of Christians resisting the Bible or finding it lacking in transformative potential (Hoggarth, 2011, pp. 13-25; Thiselton, 1992, p. 36), and also of non-Christians reading the Bible and describing it as a positive experience, but not transformative (in the way my participants believed), such as occurs in Scriptural Reasoning groups (Ford, 2006).

others to insert us into their story and envision the proper end of our lives, define for us the source and substance of human flourishing, and tell us what we should or should not desire, is for them to violate us as self-standing individuals. The Bible as a sacred text, however, does just that. (2010, pp. 32-33)

Similarly, Nick Spencer concludes that people tend to resist the Bible by treating it as irrelevant, untrue and full of contradictions, because “a deconstructed Bible, which allowed me to pick and choose and made fewer (or preferably no) demands on me, was an acceptable Bible” (2005, pp.149-150). This idea that an “acceptable Bible” is one which places minimal demands upon a reader is echoed in David Cline’s *The Bible and the Modern World* (1997). He recounts undertaking a keyword search of “Bible” in a prominent British newspaper (*The Guardian*) for the 6 months between April and September 1992. One of his observations is that the Bible was considered a foundation of moral values as long as they coincide “with contemporary values” (Clines, 1997, p. 77). Correspondingly in my case study, the text which was read least sceptically was the parable of forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35); most of my participants agreed that the general concept of forgiveness was a good one.¹³⁵

Spencer also suggests that in Britain:

Actual knowledge of Christianity is very limited but it is mistaken for genuine knowledge, causing people to become automatically resistant to the Gospel on the premise that they “already know what it is all about.” We think we have studied religious texts (when really we did some RE at school and have a Bible somewhere at home), and so when we reject Christian claims we think we do so on the basis of informed consideration. (2005, p. 143)

This limited exposure to Christianity (and the Bible) which British people grow up with and the subsequent resistance they express at a later point in life is described by Spencer as “inoculation.” “They have had a low-grade version of the real thing in their minds for so long that they have become immune to the genuine article” (2003, p. 4).

¹³⁵ There was a difference in the degree of sceptical reading noted between the five passages. Placed in order of how sceptically they were read, they are 2 Samuel 5:17-25, 2 John, Proverbs 10:1-11, Psalm 88 and Matthew 18:21-35. Even though Matthew 18:21-35 was read least sceptically, this should not be understood as having been read acceptingly, it was typically read sceptically but in a qualified way.

Sandra Schneiders considers what transformative potential the Bible has for those outside of the Church. She writes: “one cannot experience the Bible as scripture unless one can perceive in the text the very particular self-disclosure of God that is the content and form of Christian faith” (1999, pp. 60-61). She goes on to suggest that “faith” is required when reading the Bible, implying that a person with no Christian faith would struggle to read it in a Christian transformative way. In the same way, Kevin Vanhoozer, building on Stanley Hauerwas (1993) and Francis Watson (1994), suggests that “the Bible is more likely to be misunderstood by an unbelieving and unaffiliated individual than by a believing and practicing member of the church” (1998, p. 378). Accordingly, the three participants who did suggest that the texts had impacted them in a transformative way (Anthony, Andy G and Derek), all read the texts acceptingly and had some sense of religious identity. All three also indicated a desire to read the Bible more. For example, having read the five texts Derek, a 62 year old welder who identified as a non-practising Catholic, indicated that he “should make time and read my Bible so I can understand more about the teachings of God.”

Ultimately though, the second half of this chapter has demonstrated another aspect of the relational nature of reading, highlighting in particular the influence of the reader’s beliefs. On this occasion the belief that the Bible would try to influence/convert the participants, resulted in a reading transaction which I have labelled “counter-reading.” This challenges the assumption that the Bible’s status as an authoritative and sacred text has all but disappeared, for these nonreligious men handled it as a sacred text. Furthermore, the popular Christian idea that reading the Bible is transformative and a person may come to know God through that act was also complicated, for it demonstrated that in this setting most of the readers disempowered the assumed transformative potential of the text.

Conclusion

This chapter has continued to argue that the reader’s relationship with the five biblical texts shaped their reading of those texts. In particular I considered the role of the reader’s beliefs in informing the subsequent reading. Highlighting various readings, I showed that these texts were typically read for information, as one would a textbook. This may not be an issue for a passage like Proverbs 10:1-11, but is inappropriate for a poem like Psalm 88. Nonetheless even with this text most of the men tried to read it looking for facts or a teaching which they could extract and critique. I then proposed that the efferent/aesthetic spectrum, which is part

of the transactional theory, explains this reading phenomenon. It posits that a reader decides upon a reading stance prior to engaging with a text and the stance then shapes the reading transaction which follows. Finally I explored three possible reasons for the adoption of an efferent stance by these men, suggesting that the research materials influenced them in this direction and their personality and gender probably reaffirmed the appropriateness of an efferent stance. However, I argued that principally it was the reader's belief that the Bible, and so the five biblical texts, was some sort of guide or textbook which resulted in them assuming an efferent stance towards the texts and reading them for information.

I then turned to re-examine the sceptical nature of their readings, exploring the role of their beliefs. In particular I highlighted the way in which the participants acknowledged that "fear" was associated with Bible reading, along with a sense that they might feel pressurized to change their lives or convert. The assumption that I was a "religious guy" added to this sense of threat. In light of this belief they responded by counter-reading the texts, that is reading them in such a way as to deconstruct them and so disarm the assumed threat. These actions show that although these men neither read the Bible regularly nor thought it to be true or divinely inspired, they were handling it as one would a sacred text; this phenomenon challenges those who suggest that the Bible is no longer viewed as such in the West. Further, such a reading also troubles the popular Christian assumption that reading the Bible is always a transformative experience, for these men were able to defend themselves against it.

In these two ways the reader's beliefs about the Bible shaped their reading of the five biblical texts. This then was the fourth and final example to evidence my central claim that these readers' relationships with the texts shaped their reading of them. These four examples presented throughout Chapters 4, 5 and 6 make up the second strand of my argument, and Chapter 7 now turns to consider the third and final strand. Up to this point most of these readings have been ones where the reader, in some way, has dominated the text. These were readings which were undertaken in a self-affirming way. The transactional theory posits that texts are not only able to stimulate readers but they are able to lead them (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 11). Furthermore, it is in this toing and froing between the reader and the text that new understandings are produced (1995, p. 25). To that end my penultimate chapter reflects on how a reading may be shaped by, but not conform to, a reader's relationship with the text.

CHAPTER 7: Text Led Readings

A reading transaction understands there to be a relationship between the reader and the text. To that end, both the reader and the text are viewed as entities capable of contributing to this partnership. So far however, much of my thesis has demonstrated different ways in which the reader dominates this relationship, for it is their experiences, identities, attitudes, and beliefs, which shaped the reading. This penultimate chapter will review this reading phenomenon, noting other contemporary research which highlights similar findings, and its affinity with the reader-response criticism of Stanley Fish (1980). Fish contends that texts are not able to lead or provoke a reader into an unexpected reading because the reading which takes place is shaped by the reader's interpretive community. In other words, the text contributes nothing to the reading, and the reader (moulded by their interpretive community) contributes everything. Three final examples from my case study are then considered. These were occasions when the men read the texts in an unexpected way, one contrary to their preconceptions, expectations or normal way of reading. Their views or theories were not reaffirmed in their reading of the texts, but were challenged, resulting in an atypical reading. This suggests that the text is able to stimulate a reader into a reading outwith their assumptions. These examples form the third strand of my central argument, and serve not only to challenge Fish's theory, but to demonstrate a final way in which a reader's relationship with the five biblical texts shaped their reading of those texts.

The Influence of the Reader

In this thesis I have been arguing that the relationships which the men had with the five biblical texts shaped their readings of those texts. This has been achieved in two ways. First, the transactional theory has been used to theorize how a reader's relationship with a text may inform their reading of that text. Second, I have evidenced four different ways in which these men's relationships with the five texts shaped their readings of those texts. Dave and Gary's readings were explored; readings which highlighted how their prior experiences of Christianity resulted in bitter and detached readings. John's and Anthony's were then presented, and in their cases John's atheist and Anthony's Christian identity were seen to be defining factors in their readings. Victor and Paul followed, both men whose readings did not match their sense of religious identity. In their case however it was their attitude towards the biblical texts which shaped the readings, Victor deciding to give the texts "a chance" and

Paul doubting their validity. Finally, I noted that these men's beliefs about the Bible, and so the five biblical texts, also moulded their readings. First, believing the texts to be some sort of instruction manual, they read them from an efferent standpoint. Second, believing them to have a transformative potential, most of the men counter-read the texts, so as to disarm this threat. The few men who did not counter-read were typically those who had some sense of religious identity and so identified with the texts rather than against them. In all these cases, different aspects of the readers' relationship with the texts were seen to inform the subsequent reading of those texts.

In demonstrating the validity of this central claim, most of the examples given as evidence have been ones where the reader has had prime of place. In other words it was the reader's experience, sense of identity, attitude or belief which played an overriding factor in the reading which occurred. For instance, Gary's detached reading concluded that the texts were all irrelevant, John found that the texts affirmed his atheist identity, Paul's doubting attitude resulted in a sceptical reading confirming his doubts, and believing the Bible to be an instruction manual the men read it from an efferent standpoint. Victor is the exception in that he attempted to limit the influence of his preconceptions; nonetheless that same attitude of fairness was seen to inform his readings.

Reader Shaped Readings

This dominant role which my readers assumed should not be thought of as unique to this group of men, for scholars have noted that those inside the Church have often read the Bible in such a way as to uphold their ideological and theological biases.¹³⁶ As Brian Malley writes:

It is a truism that what a reader makes of a text turns heavily on the context the reader assigns to the text and to the sorts of hermeneutic assumptions the reader brings to bear on the text, and that these in turn bear the imprint of the social and historical context of the reader. (2004, p. 10)

¹³⁶ It has been similarly noted that the image of Jesus promoted by a particular group often reflects that group's identity or concerns. Jaroslav Pelikan (1985) highlights this by noting 18 different images of Jesus used during the past 2,000 years, and more recently Stephen Prothero has reflected on the images of Jesus presented in North America, (2003; 2007; Nienhuis, 2010). At an individual level, Scott McKnight has demonstrated the tendency "to project onto Jesus our own image" (2008, pp. 48-49), see also Francis and Astley (1997).

Scot McKnight captures the essence of Malley's observation, when he writes of Christians, "every one of us adopts the Bible (and at the same time) adapts the Bible to our culture," (2008, p. 13).

This is something that Liam Murphy (2009) highlights when he contrasts the way the Bible is used and read by Orangemen and charismatics in Northern Ireland. He notes that the Orangemen focused on a number of Old Testament themes revolving around God's people feeling threatened, whilst other biblical images or texts were rarely mentioned:

Saint Paul's focus on death and redemption is largely absent, as are the motifs of loving ones neighbours, turning the other cheek, humility in the face of power, and so on. In fact, with the exception of Revelation, the New Testament is generally neglected in Orange ritual. Instead we find stress placed on Pentateuch-orientated Judaism: a vengeful God who defends the righteous and abandons sinners to their well-deserved fate. (2009, p. 15)

He later writes that:

Like Orangemen, charismatics frequently invoke reference to scripture in justification of their views and practices. The difference lies not in whether or not scripture occupies a privileged place in charismatic culture, but in their willingness to emphasize some books, chapters, and verses, some images and motifs over others. (2009, p. 17)

Murphy is showing how these two groups of Christians read the Bible and use biblical images to uphold their different ideological and theological biases.

It is not only Christian lay people who have been seen to read the Bible in this way, the leaders and clergy have as well. Ian Dickson recounts the findings of *The Use of the Bible in Pastoral Practice*, a research project conducted by Cardiff University and the Bible Society in 2002-03. This project considered how the Bible was used within British churches and in particular by those in leadership within those churches. Dickson notes:

The responses indicate a view of the Bible as a “product”; suitable for reinforcing particular pre-existing stances and ministries, making use essentially a pragmatic decision. What “worked” best in my/our interests? It was Bible use with a consumerist edge. (2007, p. 109)

Anthony Thiselton also describes this self-affirming, consumerist, reading of the Bible:

The nature of the reading process is governed by horizons of expectations already pre-formed by the community of readers or by the individual. Preachers often draw from texts what they had already decided to say; congregations sometimes look to biblical readings only to affirm the community-identity and life-style which they already enjoy. (1992, p. 8)

Even biblical scholars have been found to read the Bible in a way that conforms to their cultural or theological position. Gary Williams (2002) undertook a survey of commentaries on the book of Nehemiah, focusing on Chapter 5. He found that commentators in the USA or Britain were less likely to reflect on present day issues of poverty and debt than scholars in developing countries, even though these themes are central to Nehemiah 5. Williams further notes how a scholar’s theological view also shapes their reading. For instance, he highlights that one of Cyril Barber’s applications of this text is that “Pastors face the same problem. It is always easy to allow oneself to be sidetracked by some worthy social cause” (Barber, 1976, p. 93). Williams suggests that Barber’s comment “flies in the face of the text’s emphasis” and in part is a reaction to the social gospel (2002, p. 60). Williams is yet again demonstrating the way in which a reader’s ideological or theological assumptions are upheld in their reading of a text.

Such a use of the Bible is found in wider culture and politics as well. James Crossley has traced the use of the Bible with particular reference to English popular culture and politics over the last 40 to 50 years (2014; 2015). What he highlights is way in which the presentation given of the Bible matches the particular agenda of the politician or artist. For example, he borrows Yvonne Sherwood’s (2006) term “Liberal Bible” to describe an “understanding of the Bible as supportive of freedom of conscience, rights, law and consensus” (2015, p. 24). It is this Liberal Bible which he and Sherwood argue was read and promoted by politicians such as George W. Bush, Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair. Crossley notes that such a view and

reading of the Bible is a shift away from an earlier one which he calls “the Absolute Monarchist’s Bible, where decisions made by the monarch were to be seen as proof of divine power” (2015, p. 24).

Stanley Hauerwas notes the tendency of Christians to read the Bible in denominationally and politically affirming ways and because of this provocatively argues that:

The Bible is not and should not be accessible to merely anyone, but rather it should only be made available to those who have undergone the hard discipline of existing as part of God’s people. (1993, p. 9, emphasis in original)

Chillingly, Robert Bates comments that although nowadays Christianity and Nazism are viewed as mutually exclusive, in the 1930s many Nazis “viewed themselves as good ‘positive’ Christians” (2009, p. 30). What Bates then explores are the various ways in which the Bible was re-interpreted to affirm German “National Socialist ideas, teachings and terminology” (2009, p. 31). The year before Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, at a lecture entitled *The Church is Dead*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer argued:

Has it not become terrifyingly clear again and again, in everything that we have said here to one another, that we are no longer obedient to the Bible? We are more fond of our own thoughts than of the thoughts of the Bible. We no longer read the Bible seriously, we no longer read it against ourselves, but for ourselves. If the whole conference here is to have any great significance, it may be perhaps that of showing us that we must read the Bible in quite a different way, until we find ourselves again. (1965, pp. 185-186)

Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones assume that Bonhoeffer is reflecting upon his own theological reading of the Bible, one overly informed by his Lutheran and German heritage. They suggest that becoming a Christian, along with his experiences abroad, resulted in his focusing upon “the importance of allowing Scripture to challenge the presumptions with which we come to the text” (1991, pp. 140-141). However, in the lecture itself Bonhoeffer makes no mention of his own heritage or presumptions. Having made this provocative call to read the Bible against ourselves, he goes on to note the destructive role which hatred, enmity and power have been playing, implicitly suggesting that these are the consequences of

reading the Bible “for ourselves.” Thus I would contend that Bonhoeffer is referring to reading the Bible for our own aggrandisement, and perhaps hinting at the re-interpretation which Bates noted. Whatever the case, Bonhoeffer, Crossley, Sherwood and Bates are all highlighting how a reader’s political and ideological views can be reaffirmed as they read the Bible.

The tendency of a reader, or community of readers, to shape their reading in a self-affirming way is not limited to the Bible. Elizabeth Flynn’s study of male and female readers, noted that the men were more likely to dominate a text, holding it at arm’s length and imposing “a previously established structure on the text” and so reducing the possibility of learning (1986, p. 268). David Smith (2004; 2007), similarly commented on his students tendency to dominate texts in a particular way. He was teaching German to a class of students at a North American Evangelical college, and gave them poetry by Ernst Jandl to read, observing that the students:

Were lured by Jandl’s poem into a reading clearly rooted in personal resonances, yet also shaped by standard cultural schemata and communal interpretive strategies. In the process they came up with a reading that is both hermeneutically and theologically dubious. (2004, pp. 148-149)

Smith argues that the poem’s intertextual allusions contradicted the readings undertaken by the students. With critical questioning the group of students would eventually reject their earlier reading of the poem (p. 150).

Strictly speaking, with the exception of German socialist Christian readings of the Bible, these examples should not be thought of as ideological or contextual readings, for that is not what the readers understood themselves to be doing. An ideological or contextual reading is one where the reader is able to name an ideology (such as Marxism), or a context (such as a Brazilian favela) and engages with a text in the light of that ideology or context. What these examples demonstrate is how the Bible can be read in such a way as to uphold the reader’s ideological and theological presuppositions without them realising it.

This was also seen in my case study. Sam’s readings which I presented in the introduction to this thesis are an example of this, for they resulted in nearly every text conforming to the

formula: do X, or Y will happen. Anthony's Christian reading of the five texts is another one, for he was able to find a positive message in the most hopeless of texts (Psalm 88). However, it was also the case that in some instances the reader had consciously decided to read the Bible in such a way as to uphold a particular ideology or expectation, such as Victor deciding he was going to "be fair" when reading the texts. Nevertheless, whether a reader consciously or unconsciously upholds a particular presupposition the result is the same, the reader is preeminent in the reading transaction, and the reading often affirms the conscious or unconscious expectations of the reader. This was seen in my readings outside the Church, but the examples contained in the last few pages demonstrate that it also occurs inside the Church.

The Reader-Response Theory of Stanley Fish

The pre-eminence of the reader as they engaged with the text fits comfortably with reader-response criticism, for it emphasizes the role of the reader in reading. However, some reader-response theories, such as the transactional theory, allow for the possibility of a reading dominated by the reader but indicate that this is not always the case. Others, such as that proposed by Stanley Fish (1980), insist that the reader (and the community of which they are a part) will always dominate the reading and there is no alternative.¹³⁷ This is because, according to Fish reality can never be known objectively, what exists must be interpreted in order for it to have any significance or meaning. Therefore, any significance or meaning which is attributed to reality is composed by ourselves (1980, p. 11). Fish has a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, and so with reference to reading he argues that a text does not exist in itself rather it only exists in the mind of the reader. He is not claiming that the page with black squiggles on it is not real, instead he is pointing out that a person will never know what that object with squiggles on it is until they attempt to read it. However, as all reading involves the act of interpretation and it is the reader who does the interpreting, the text only takes shape in the mind of the reader. Therefore he concludes that "the text as an entity independent of interpretation [...] drops out and is replaced by the texts that emerge as the consequence of our interpretive activities" (1980, p. 13). For Fish, texts do not exist as external objects; they only exist in the reader:

¹³⁷ A similar view is held by the pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, who writes "the critic asks neither the author nor the text about their intentions but simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose. He makes the text refer to whatever is relevant to that purpose" (1982, p. 151; Rorty, 1991, pp.78-110).

Interpretive strategies are not put into execution after reading; they are the shape of reading, and because they are the shape of reading, they give texts their shape, making them rather than, as is usually assumed, arising from them. (1980, p. 13)

Of particular importance to my case study is Fish's understanding that the text does not evoke a response from a reader or contribute to the reading. He makes this point forcefully when arguing against Wolfgang Iser (1974; 1978) who posits that both text and reader contribute to the meaning produced in a reading. Fish counters that "there is no distinction between what the text gives and what the reader supplies; he [the reader] supplies *everything*;" (1981, p. 7, emphasis in original). This theory is a popular one and has been applied to reading the Bible. For example, Eryl Davies (2013) traces the emergence of reader-response criticism within literary and biblical studies. He suggests one of the contributions of this "turn to the reader" is a greater appreciation that a single text can have multiple meanings, for different readers bring different presuppositions to the text which uniquely shape the reading and meaning produced. Davies then considers the question: are all readings/meanings equally valid or are some better than others?

The question was, however, who decides? Whose reading counts? Who had the competence and authority to validate a given interpretation? The answer to this imponderable was provided by Stanley Fish. (2013, p. 20)

For Davies, Fish's theory, that the reader's interpretive community validates and limits the potentially endless plurality of meanings, solved the problem. Thus the church (one interpretive community) can read the Bible in a certain way, and the academy (another interpretive community) can read it in a different way. Both these interpretive communities act in different ways to restrict which readings of the Bible are considered acceptable. Davies writes:

The community will determine the range of meanings a given text can accommodate, and will adjudicate between readings that are admissible and those that are misguided. Each interpretative community will have its own criteria of evidence and its own measures of adequacy, and any given interpretation will be deemed to be valid when the interpretative community agrees it is valid. Such agreement is vital, for there is no objective criteria by which to judge the validity

of a given interpretation apart from the assent of the interpretative community from which it emerged. (2013, p. 28)

In Davies' case (so too Stephen Moore, 1986), he is persuaded that Fish's theory adequately describes and informs how the Bible is read by real readers. Other scholars have used Fish to argue for the validity of the Christian interpretive community (Petric, 2012; Clines, 1997) or the need for inter-community dialogue and friendship with reference to Bible reading (Jasper, 1999). However, what follows calls into question Fish's claim that the reader contributes everything to a reading and the text brings nothing, for it explores three occasions in which the reader did not dominate the text, rather the text led the reader. This is to say, the reader's relationship with the five biblical texts shaped their reading of those texts, but not always in a way which conformed to the reader's assumptions.

The Influence of the Text

Fish's claim not only contrasts Iser's thinking but also that of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer argued for the place of the reader's prejudices in reading (1979, p. 246), but went on to suggest that the reader is not trapped by those prejudices, but rather is open to allowing the text to "assert its own truth against one's own fore-meaning" (1979, p. 238). So too Umberto Eco argues against the reader being wholly responsible for the construction of meaning, rather he posits that the "intention of the text" guides the reader, constraining the possible meanings attached to the text (1992, pp. 25, 45-66). The transactional theory also contends that texts can and do shape a reading. The text contributes something, for it is in the transaction between it and the reader that meaning emerges. Rosenblatt argues that a text can stir up a reader, by this she understands that particular signs (squiggles) on the page stimulate particular memories, experiences, concepts and so on (2005, pp. xxv, 9, 31). Moreover, the text not only stimulates, but "helps to regulate what shall be held in the forefront of the reader's attention," (1994, p. 11). To that end reading can have a liberating effect, whereby a reader can vicariously participate in a time, culture or context with which they and their interpretive community are unfamiliar. Rosenblatt writes:

The physical signs of the text enable him [sic] to reach through himself [sic] and the verbal symbols to something sensed as outside and beyond his [sic] own personal world. The boundary between inner and outer world breaks down, and

the literary work of art, as so often remarked, leads us into a new world. (1994, p. 21)

In other words the text has the potential to lead the reader into unknown territory or an interpretation which they had not anticipated.

A central difference between Rosenblatt's view of reading and Fish's, concerns the question: How is reality known? Fish understands that, as humans located in time and space, all our engagement with the world is interpreted; an interpretation only made possible, but also limited by, our social networks which have shaped us, that is our interpretive communities. Rosenblatt also assumes that all engagement with the world is interpretive, but adds that those objects which are being interpreted are able to inform and shape that interpretation. Thus she contends that a text is able to guide the reader and influence what meaning emerges. Accordingly, this results in some interpretations being better than others, reflecting a critical realist ontology.

The three examples which follow demonstrate the way in which a reader can approach the texts with a set of assumptions only to find that they are challenged by the text. Unlike Victor, these were not occasions when the readers had consciously decided to suspend particular preconceptions. Instead, these were men who found that the text evoked in them a response which they had not anticipated, one outwith their expectations.

Stewart's "Powerful" Reading

Stewart is a 41 year old welder, who identifies as "not at all religious." He is married and has two young daughters whom he enjoys spending time with, to that end life outside of work was mainly taken up with family. Stewart was quick-witted and usually the source of much banter during my visits. He is the younger brother of Dave, who I noted read "bitterly" (in Chapter 4) and like Dave, he spoke negatively about his past, though in his case it was his Dad rather than the churches they attended which he focused upon:

I mean I was, we were pretty much dragged to Church. Well my Dad had a few problems to be honest with you. And eh, I don't know. His Dad went to the way of God and 'cause he was in the Navy and he, he felt guilty about what he did in

the Navy during the war. He kinda, that affected him. Which kinda affected my Dad, which he just, I don't know what, make himself feel better I suppose. But, dragged us along with him. I never wanted to go. Things like Sunday School and all the rest [...] You grow up in an environment like that you can't wait to get away from it.

Stewart read most of the texts from an efferent standpoint and in a detached way, much as Gary had done (in Chapter 4). He described the Bible as a moral guide, one which may be of relevance to others, but not to him. Accordingly, he did not annotate any text and described most of them as irrelevant and not worth remembering. When asked about this in our interview he said it was "because I do know it is never going to play a part of my life." He would later say that the texts have "not affected me, anything that was to affect me regarding religion was done when I was younger anyway, no, it could never affect me." Stewart's detached reading of the texts was one shaped by his prior religious experiences.

However, there was one text which he did not read in a detached way and that was Psalm 88. Stewart did not annotate this text, but his answers in the accompanying questionnaire suggested that he had found this text stimulating. For example, when asked: What, if anything, "jumped out at you" as you read through the passage? Stewart wrote: "It was very powerful." When asked what his gut reaction was to this passage he wrote: "I think it was very powerful." In the remainder of the questionnaire Stewart did not elaborate as to how or why he found the Psalm "powerful," thankfully though in the interview he was more forthcoming.

David: This was the Psalm, what did you make of that one? [Indicating Psalm 88]

Stewart: Sad, it's sad. That someone. It's quite funny that it was used in the Bible to be honest. It's sad that someone could trust a God and then realise the path they are going down and not being answered. So someone, say, who was very, very ill or very, very poorly and in pain or can't understand what they have done wrong to deserve what they got. That's quite powerful that one.

David: OK, powerful in what way?

Stewart: Powerfulness in, in it rings true to life really, sometimes.

[The conversation continues onto 2 John, before returning to Psalm 88]

David: Can I just clarify for my own sake. So you think this one was powerful
[indicating Psalm 88] because you feel it relates to you?

Stewart: Well, I, it's related to parts of my life.

David: OK.

Stewart: I used to have a "Jesus Loves Us" sticker on the side of our bed and used to listen to me Mum and Dad row at night and then hide behind the church where everything was good and everyone was happy and everyone. And I used to cry looking at that sticker, and I still at times, when I get down, when I think about that. Although I haven't had the pain when religion was put on me, eh, I can understand someone that believes in the Lord and feels let down. I was a very frightened child.

Contrasting Stewart's indifferent and efferent reading of the other four texts, this had been a stimulating read, Stewart had been drawn into the world of the poem/song. He had read it from an aesthetic standpoint, focusing on what he was "living through during his relationship with that particular text" (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 25). Specifically, he found he could identify with the psalmist and the pain which was expressed. This resulted in him finding himself immersed in the Psalm. "Powerful" was the word which summed up his reading. My field notes record that contrasting his usual jovial self, Stewart was unusually quiet and reflective after reading it.

This is an example of the way in which a text can lead a reader to an unexpected interpretation, one significantly different to their established reading pattern. As Stewart engaged with Psalm 88 he responded to the emerging reading with surprise and empathy. The difference between his responses to this text and the detached reading of the other four demonstrates the role which the text can play in leading a reader into unknown territory. In

all five readings the same painful experiences and assumptions played a significant role, what resulted in a powerful rather than detached reading was the specific content of Psalm 88.

My suggestion that Stewart was led by and responded to Psalm 88, is a more coherent understanding of what took place than that implied by Fish, who would argue that Stewart had constructed for himself a stimulating text using his socially produced assumptions, that is, his interpretive community. Such an explanation raises the question, why did Stewart not construct the other texts in a similarly stimulating way? Fish's theory places too much weight on the reader's socially produced assumptions. When recounting teaching a seminar on literary theory, Fish suggests that "theories always work and they will always produce exactly the results they predict" (1980, p. 68). Therefore his class "did not concentrate on what theories can do (since they will always generate the texts demanded by their assumptions)" (1980, p. 68). Such a belief does correspond with most of the examples in this case study. However, Stewart's reading of Psalm 88 was one contrary to the assumptions and theories which had shaped his reading of the other four texts. His engagement with Psalm 88 was informed by those assumptions but did not reaffirm them rather it challenged them. The same experiences which resulted in his detached reading of the other texts were vital for this powerful reading, for he found that the subject matter of the Psalm related to those experiences in an unforeseen way. Louise Rosenblatt writes: "powerful personal reverberations and moments of intensity or illumination may be the result of the coming-together of the reader and the text at an especially propitious moment" (1994, pp. 157-158). This was the case in Stewart's reading transaction with Psalm 88, one where the text provoked, stimulated and guided him into an unexpected reading, one which stood against the assumptions and theories which shaped his reading of the other four texts.

Others who have engaged with Fish's work have raised a similar question. John Barton is one of a number of scholars who note that according to Fish a text is not something a reader responds to rather it is something they construct for themselves, and so asks:

How can a text ever surprise or inform us, if we ourselves bring the meaning to it, if the text is nothing but an occasion for us to formulate ideas which we ourselves find unexceptionable? (2002, p. 149).

A similar point is also made by Terry Eagleton (2012, pp. 39-41), Grant Osborne, (2006, pp. 478-482), Terrence Wright (1999, p. 30), and Anthony Thiselton, (1992, pp. 549-550). In this way then Stewart's reading of Psalm 88 problematizes Fish's theory for it suggests that the text contributes something to the reading which takes place.

Ethan's Sceptical Readings

The following two examples are briefer and demonstrate that a reading informed by the text does not always result in a positive or coherent experience for the reader. Ethan is a 40 year old engineer who got married during my time at the Chemical Industrial Plant. He described himself as "not at all religious" but an "open minded" and spiritual person. Until his late teenage years he and his family attended church on occasion, significantly though he did not know how many gospels there were in the Bible,¹³⁸ and did not describe this earlier church contact as personally meaningful. He was a strongly sceptical reader, tending to focus on the parts of the text which he felt were wrong.

During our interview I pointed out to him that most of his annotations were comments highlighting a contradiction or discrepancy, they appeared to focus on aspects of the texts which he disagreed with. His reply surprised me.

Ethan: I didn't expect anything negative.

David: Sorry?

Ethan: That's my preconception of what may be in the Bible is a positive way to look at life. I didn't expect that negativity and in that degree as well.

Earlier in our conversation he had indicated a number of times, how "negative" he found various aspects of the texts. For instance when asked if anything surprised him about the passages he said:

¹³⁸ This Question occurred in the Entrance Questionnaire, see Appendix C.

Some of the texts were quite negative. Em, they gave maybe a sort of sandwich between good comments about this is maybe what you should do and then if you don't, this will happen. And I'm thinking, that shouldn't, that wasn't expected.

I followed up this question by asking Ethan if there was a passage which particularly stood out to him for any reason and he replied:

There's two of them and I'm just trying to remember which one they are. It was the song and it was the, it was the last one we did, was it the letter to, that they wrote. And it was for those reasons [the negativity]. The song, I think it was quite condemning, if you didn't do or behave in a way it was stating and the same for the last passage [...] I didn't expect it to, it cast aside or it gave the ability to cast aside people and I didn't expect that from a religion or the Bible. I thought it was believe in forgiveness and understanding.

Ethan's expectation was that the Bible would contain a "positive way to look at life" and he did not expect it would have statements condemning people. At the end of our interview he reflected on whether the Bible has developed through the years, and said:

Because then you could say that these negative statements may have been true then [when the texts were written] although they aren't in the modern world, or they aren't in my impression of the modern world today.

Contrasting many of the men, Ethan's expectations did not lead him to impose them upon the texts and read them in a way which affirmed those expectations. Contrary to Fish's claim that theories "will always generate the texts demanded by their assumptions" (1980, p. 68), Ethan found that his theory, that the Bible was a book containing a "positive way to look at life," fell short of the texts he read, and resulted in a reading at odds with that theory. Ethan's reading was one in which his theory, or assumption, did not have a preeminent role rigidly enforcing a reading in which that theory was upheld. The content of the texts were such that those assumptions were called into question and an unexpected reading occurred. His assumptions certainly informed his reading, for when finding that those assumptions were not confirmed, Ethan read strongly sceptically. Tellingly, when asked if he had any over-all

impressions about the Bible passages he said: “it showed me I don’t know what’s in the Bible.”

Phil’s Confused Reading

The third example which challenges the view that a text contributes nothing to a reading concerns the confusion which one of the men expressed towards Psalm 88. I noted in Chapter 6 that the men assumed an efferent stance towards the five biblical texts because they believed the Bible to be a didactic text. To that end, there were examples of men who read Psalm 88 efferently and found that their reading affirmed that efferent stance, leaving them feeling they had successfully understood the Psalm, even if they rejected it. For example, Peter is a 56 year old electrician who identified as “not at all religious,” and in the Entrance Questionnaire he described the Bible as: “A book of stories and interpretations of how we should behave.” In the accompanying questionnaire Peter would describe Psalm 88 as an “evil” and “bullying” text, one which was a “threat” or “warning” that “if you do not do as you are told, ‘God’ will not see you.” In our interview this was the text which he said stood out to him due to its threatening message and he “didn’t like it, didn’t like it at all.” Peter had assumed an efferent stance towards this text and so read it seeking information, in this case a central message. Having been able to claim that he had grasped this central message, Peter’s efferent stance towards this text was confirmed and vindicated. Interestingly, Peter was not the only one to read this Psalm in this particular way, Dave, Tony, Ethan and Sam all concluded that this text was a warning to any reader that if they ignore God their life would be miserable and God would not help them even if they ask.

However, as I highlighted with Stewart, such an efferent reading was not always the case. Phil is a 48 year old electrician at the Plant, who described himself as “slightly religious,” and found this Psalm confusing. He was a strongly sceptical reader who, with most of the men, assumed an efferent stance towards all the texts. With most of the texts Phil was able to articulate what he felt each was claiming and why he disagreed with it, but not with Psalm 88. Phil did not annotate the Psalm but he spoke about it in this way:

Mmm, it, it’s more confusing than anything else. It doesn’t seem to give. I can’t see a clear message in that. There’s no, em, there doesn’t seem to be. It’s almost like a poem. Does that make sense?

Phil expected this text to conform to the efferent reading stance he had assumed by having a clear message or directive. However, his assumption did not lead him to find such a message, rather the assumption was found wanting. Phil was able to identify the text as a poem, and this is perhaps due to the short descriptor I included where the Psalm was described as a “song”.¹³⁹ Nonetheless, Phil still read it from an efferent standpoint, expecting it to have “a clear message.” This is a further example of the way in which a reader’s expectations will not always result in a reading which conforms to those expectations. It also demonstrates the strength of those expectations, for although Phil was able to identify the genre of this text as poetry he did not attempt to read it aesthetically. Once again a reader’s assumptions did not produce the phenomenon they expected to find, all of which troubles Fish’s theory which seems to reduce the text to the function of a Rorschach ink blot upon which the viewer/reader projects themselves. Instead, with Rosenblatt I would contend that a literary text is not a neutral inkblot, but a series of patterns which a reader engages with:

The transactional view, whilst insisting on the importance of the reader’s contribution, does not discount the text and accepts a concern for validity of interpretation. Misinterpretations may thus provide clues to the reader’s preoccupations, but responses may also be a function of characteristics of the text, viewed in the light of the peculiar complex nature of the literary encounter. (1994, p. 151)

Summary

Stewart, Ethan and Phil did not actively choose to suspend their preconceptions towards the biblical texts, as Victor had, rather it was in the reading transactions themselves that the text challenged those preconceptions, leading the reader to an unexpected reading. In Stewart’s case one he would describe as “powerful,” in Ethan’s one resulting in a sceptical reading and for Phil the consequence was confusion. These examples suggest that a reader is not limited by their preconceptions, assumptions, theory or interpretive community, for the transaction with the text was able to produce an atypical or unknown reading. These three examples are in a minority however, for most of the men read in such a way that their assumptions, expectations and so on were affirmed in their reading, as explored in the previous three

¹³⁹ See Appendix G for a copy of Psalm 88’s short descriptor given to the participants.

chapters. This does not lessen the significance of Stewart, Ethan and Phil's readings, instead it demonstrates that Fish's theory does adequately describes the majority of the readings, but not all. Rosenblatt's transactional theory however, does account for all the readings which took place.

Fish may not agree with this conclusion and might argue that this is my interpretation of the data, one shaped and limited by my interpretive community. He, being shaped and limited by his interpretive community, would interpret the data differently. To his way of thinking, what is more important is whether our interpretive communities accept our different retellings of this case study. Such a response shows the difficulty in arguing against such a relativistic theory, for any evidence presented is considered an interpretation of the data, one no better or worse than an opposing interpretation. Terry Eagleton describes the impasse in this way: if Fish "cannot understand you, this is probably because you inhabit an interpretive community incommensurable with his own, and your criticism may thus safely be ignored" (2012, p. 44). The difference again concerns how reality is known. To that end a more fruitful discussion may be to contrast the implications of the transactional theory and Fish's theory for the biophysical world where universal "laws" are spoken of, and the ethical world with its concept of human rights or virtues. Such a comparison would not only prove fruitful in further clarifying differences between both theories, but may progress the apparent stalemate which exists by showing one theory to be more robust or workable than the other.

These three examples therefore are a further way in which the reader's relationship with the five biblical texts shaped their readings of those texts, where the majority of this thesis has highlighted ways in which the men defined their reading transactions. The examples of Stewart, Ethan and Phil demonstrate that the text was able to lead the reader in an unexpected direction, to an unforeseen reading.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have contended that a text is able to guide a reader into an unexpected reading, one which is a result of, but does not conform to, their relationship with the text. This is the third strand of my central argument that the reader's relationship with the five biblical texts shaped their reading of those texts. The first strand was the theorizing of my argument using the transactional theory of reading. The second strand evidenced my central

argument by demonstrating how my reader's experiences, identities, attitudes and beliefs shaped their reading of the texts. What these examples also illustrated was the way in which a reader can assume a controlling position towards a text, a phenomenon that has been noted within Christian readings of the Bible as well.

Finally, my third strand has shown that although the reader's relationships with the texts shaped their reading, it did not always result in a reading which reaffirmed the readers' preconceptions. In other words, the reader did not always dominate the text, on occasion the text led the reader into an unforeseen reading. This was noted in Stewart's powerful reading of Psalm 88 which contrasted his detached reading of the other four texts. In Ethan's case the result of his expectations not being met was a sceptical reading, and for Phil it was confusion. In all three cases the reader's attitudes towards the texts or expectations of them played a significant role, but they did not result in a reading which reaffirmed them. These three examples trouble the literary theory of Stanley Fish (1980), who argues that the reader will always read in conformity to their interpretive community and its assumptions. For him, the text is unable to stimulate, guide, provoke or lead. However, I would posit that the examples of Stewart, Ethan and Phil have illustrated how a text is able to stimulate a reader into the unexpected. Thus the reader's relationship with the five biblical texts was indeed a relationship, understood as the transaction between two parties, one where the reader often dominated, but not always.

CONCLUSION: Relational Bible Reading... So What?

This thesis has explored the way in which a reader's relationship with a text shapes their reading of that text, with reference to a particular group of readers and a particular group of texts. This final chapter will trace the three strands of this central argument which I have been making in Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7. I will also revisit the five insights from this case study which problematize various assumptions in the academic and Christian world. Having done so I will then note the three specific ways in which this work is an original contribution to knowledge, before reflecting upon four implications of it for Bible reading studies and practice. This chapter concludes by discussing three limitations of the work and the potential for further research which they stimulate.

Summary of Thesis

The central claim of this thesis is that my readers' relationships with the five biblical texts shaped their readings of those texts. That is to say, all that a reader is in relation to a text, their presuppositions, beliefs, fears, hopes, attitudes, past experiences and sense of identity shaped their reading of it. I have argued this in three ways. First, I theorized this relational view of reading using Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory, for she postulated that readers and texts co-exist in a dynamic matrix and that all that a reader is in relation to a text shapes their reading of that text. She writes:

The reader, drawing on past linguistic and life experience, links the signs on the page with certain words, certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, scenes. The special meanings and, more particularly, the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to him [sic]. The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his inter-fusion with the peculiar contribution of the text. (1995, p. 30)

Furthermore, she then contends that through the process of selective attention certain aspects of a reader's relationship with a text will be considered more salient to the reading than others. Those aspects which are considered salient will shape the reading more than those which are not.

Having provided a theoretical foundation for my central claim, the second strand of my argument involved demonstrating four different ways in which my readers' relationships with the five biblical texts shaped their readings of those texts. First, I highlighted the influence of the reader's prior experiences of religion upon their readings, by recounting Dave's bitter, and Gary's detached readings. Second, in order to demonstrate the link between my readers' sense of religious identity and the sceptical or accepting nature of their readings I explored John's atheist and Anthony's Christian readings of the texts. Third, I considered the role of the participants' attitudes towards the Bible, for in the case of Victor and Paul their attitudes informed their readings more than their sense of religious identity. Fourth, I explored two ways in which these men's beliefs about the Bible shaped their reading of the biblical texts. What I argued was that these men believed the Bible was in some way an instruction manual and so assumed an efferent stance towards the texts. They also believed it was transformative and so many participants counter-read in order to disarm this apparent threat. These four examples demonstrate how these readers' relationships with the five biblical texts shaped their readings of those texts.

This second strand also showed that the reader's relationship with the texts was often reinforced by their reading of the texts. For example, believing the text to be a moral guide, they read it attempting to extract ethical directives from the text, which in turn reinforced their belief that it is a moral guide. However, the third strand of my argument examined ways in which the readers' relationships with the texts shaped their readings of the texts, but did not reinforce the pre-existing nature of some part of that relationship. Stewart's "powerful" reading of Psalm 88, Ethan's expectations that the Bible contained a "positive way to look at life," and Phil's confusion when attempting to read Psalm 88 efferently, all demonstrate this. Although these examples were in a minority they further illustrated the relational nature of reading, one where both the reader and the text have the potential to contribute, for that is the nature of a relationship. In these three ways I have argued that my reader's relationships with the five biblical texts shaped their readings of those texts.

I also presented five smaller arguments in addition to my central claim. In these instances, I was bringing certain insights from my case study to bear on a number of different assumptions found within the academic or Christian world. First, I noted that contextual Bible reading approaches, such as CBS, believe that the geographical setting of the reading will significantly inform the subsequent interpretation (Peden, 2005; Lawrence, 2009; Riches, 2010). In my case though, there was minimal linking of the biblical texts, or ideas, to the Chemical Industrial context in which these Bible readings were located. This suggests that some social locations are more significant than others, in the case of my participants their sense of religious identity was of greater influence than their workplace setting. Second, those who identified as “not at all religious” typically read sceptically whilst those who identified as “religious,” in some way, were more likely to read acceptingly. However, this sceptical/accepting binary which I used, and reflects similar pairings found within academia (Davies, 2004; Volf, 2010), was itself brought into scrutiny for amongst these men a clear binary did not exist rather a spectrum of readings could be seen. Moreover, on occasion, the men’s religious identity did not always correspond to the sceptical or accepting reading anticipated, cautioning against the use of an over simplistic binary. Third and fourth, some such as Vincent (2012) and Aichele (2001) have argued that the Bible has retained very little authority or power in the Western world, and others, such as the Bible Society, contend that it is a text with agency-like qualities, capable of transforming the reader. My case study challenges both views, for on the one hand my participants read the biblical texts as if they had a transformative potential. On the other hand however, this was a potential which they felt threatened by and so counter-read, disempowering the perceived threat. Finally, although most of the men read the texts in such a way that their preconceptions were affirmed, all did not. The three occasions in which an unexpected reading occurred problematizes the reader-response theory of Stanley Fish (1980). He contends that the reader contributes everything to the reading and the text brings nothing, but in these cases the content of the text provoked the reader to an atypical reading, one beyond the assumptions and expectations derived from their interpretive community. In other words, these were readings which did not reinforce the reader’s prior relationship with the texts.

Contribution of Thesis

This case study is unique, principally because it has directly examined how British people who do not regularly read the Bible or go to church, read the Bible. There are those, like

Village (2007) or Rogers (2013a; 2013b) who have considered how regular Bible readers read the Bible. Others, such as Macdonald (2007; 2009) and Webster (2015) have engaged with those who are not regular churchgoers, but the aim of these works was to consider the use of *Lectio Divina* (Macdonald) or CBS (Webster). Le Grys (2010) similarly used nonreligious participants in his Bible reading study but they acted as a comparison with his larger group of religious readers upon whom he focused. There is plenty of quantitative and qualitative research which has considered nonreligious peoples' attitudes to and beliefs about the Bible (Theos, 2012; Spender, 2005). However, none of these works has directly explored how the Bible is read by non-regular Bible readers. This is therefore the principal contribution which my work makes, as it is the first to directly describe how British men who are not regular Bible readers, read the Bible.

Moreover, in doing so, I have linked together the belief that the Bible is an instruction manual with the adoption of an efferent stance. Researchers have noted that the Bible is commonly viewed as an instruction manual (Engelke, 2013; Theos, 2012; Beal, 2010; Le Grys, 2010; Spencer, 2005) and Rosenblatt's efferent/aesthetic spectrum has been explored and promoted, mainly by literary and education scholars (Karolides, 2000; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007, Kesler, 2012). By bringing these two components together I have illuminated a particular aspect of Bible reading which lay in shadow. This linking of concepts across academic disciplines also demonstrates the usefulness of interdisciplinary research, where connections can be made and insights gained as different fields of study are traversed.

Finally, no one has described or defined "counter-reading" as I do: a reading style emanating from a reader's personal response to an assumed threat which is posed by a text's assumed transformative potential. Some make use of the term "resisting reading" (Fetterley, 1978; Harding, 2006), "reading against the grain" (Domeris, 1991; Clines, 1995; West, 2004), or "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Fiorenza, 1984; Aichele *et al.*, 1995, pp. 272-308; Volf, 2010) and others highlight the texts historical legacy (Braun, 1990, p. 63; Fiorenza, 1993, p. 11). These four overlapping concepts lack the personal sense of threat and defensive response seen in my case study. In introducing this term I have extended scholarly understanding of how readers' respond to texts.

Implications of Thesis

Research such as this not only describes a previously unexplored area, but it also has implications for the study of Bible reading. In light of my central argument there are at least four implications. First, the claim made to read the Bible from a specific social location, such as a feminist, African, or disabled reading, should be qualified for there are other aspects of these readers' relationships with the Bible which will also shape the reading. Second, study into biblical literacy should focus less on Bible knowledge or cultural appropriations of biblical tropes, but rather explore people's relationship with the Bible. Third, in Bible reading settings, such as the church, an aesthetic reading of the Bible should be promoted. Fourth, all readers of the Bible should be aware of the potential, perhaps a tendency, for the reader to dominate the reading. In highlighting these implications, I am aware that some readers of this thesis may well note others, reflecting their own background, training and interests. However, in light of the ethical parameters of my study along with my own interests and training, I will focus on these four.

First, as Chapter 1 documented it is relatively common in the subfield of contextual Bible reading for the scholar/reader to identify the social location from which they are reading the text. For instance, I presented John Hull (2001) as someone who reads the Bible in light of his blindness and there are many other examples of contextual Bible reading.¹⁴⁰ However, my central finding that the reader's relationship with a text shapes their reading of that text challenges the neatness of the claim to read from a particular social location. Rather, it suggests that the reader's relationship with the text informs the reading, a relationship which includes various social locations, (such as their attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, preoccupations and personality). Not all of these will have a significant impact upon the reading which takes place, selective attention means that some will inform the reading more than others. Nevertheless, it will never be only one social location which shapes a reading, it will be many.

To put it starkly, just as there is no such thing as a neutral or objective reading of a text, so too there is no such thing as a blind, feminist, African or disabled reading of the Bible. Rather there are readings undertaken by blind, feminist, African or disabled readers who bring all that they are to the biblical text - that is their personality, attitudes, expectations, beliefs,

¹⁴⁰ For example, see: Sugirtharajah (1991); Gottwald & Horsley (1993); Brenner & Fontaine (1997); Guest, *et al.* (2006); and Avalos *et al.* (2007).

interests, motivations and so on, along with the particular social location they are choosing to publicly identify with. These other aspects of their relationship with the Bible will also shape their reading to a greater or lesser degree, and so should be acknowledged as well. Hull for example is a Christian and this religious identity and related attitudes and beliefs also permeate his book, as does his gender, academic training, Western life style, personality, temperament and a myriad of other factors I suspect. He does not claim that these other components have not influenced his reading of the Bible, but his work is principally identified with one social location, his blindness. Mieke Bal (1987) is another example. She undertakes a series of feminist readings of the Bible utilizing different literary tools, such as a narratology or psychoanalysis. What is missing however is any reference to her attitudes, experiences, identity or beliefs which shaped these readings as well. Hull and Bal are not alone, for a cursory glance at contextual Bible reading titles and at the labels which scholars adopt (such as “black,” “postmodern,” “postcolonial” and so on) indicates that many of them identify with one social location, ignoring or playing down other aspects of their relationship with the Bible.

This is not always the case. Gregory Jenks’ (2014) intertextual reading of Jonah, is an example of a contextual reading, but one undertaken only after a detailed description of his own upbringing, experiences, interests and sense of identity. The emergence of autobiographical biblical criticism further demonstrates awareness that all that a reader is shapes their reading. These examples however are in the minority more often than not scholars concentrate on one particular social location marginalising other aspects of their relationship with the text. My case study suggests that if a reader’s relationship with a text shapes their reading of that text, then a wider identification of the social locations or influences upon the reading transaction should be acknowledged.

Second, I also highlighted in Chapter 1 that “biblical literacy” is a contested term, one which some have used to refer to Bible knowledge (Davies, 2009), whilst others have used to describe the presence of biblical tropes and images in popular culture (Meredith, 2015). For this reason surveys often consider three, four or five aspects of biblical literacy, not just one. Clive Field’s meta-analysis is one example of this, for he addressed five different areas: ownership of the Bible, readership of the Bible, knowledge of the Bible’s content, belief in

the Bible's veracity, and influence of the Bible in everyday life (2014).¹⁴¹ This demonstrates the way in which biblical literacy research is being subdivided into component parts, each with its own research question, such as: How many people own a Bible?, or How often is the Bible read? This fragmentation of biblical literacy and the study attached to it is troubled by my central finding, for if a reader's relationship with a text shapes their reading of that text, then the central question which should be asked is: What is the British public's relationship with the Bible?¹⁴² The answer to this would not only encompass established areas of biblical literacy such as Bible knowledge, belief and so on, but it would also consider other areas like a reader's experiences, hopes and hurts in regard to the Bible, which rarely feature in biblical literacy research.¹⁴³ In this way both a more holistic appreciation of the British public's biblical literacy, and a clearer insight into a central tenet of it, would be gained.

Third, I found that most of the men in my study read most of the texts efferently, doing so because they viewed the Bible as a guide or didactic text and I suspect that within the British church the Bible is handled in a very similar way. For example, Andrew Rogers' explored how the Bible was used from the pulpit in two English evangelical churches (one reformed and one charismatic) and described observing a "one-way hermeneutics" comprised of exegesis or engagement with the text and then application (2013b, p. 496). To handle the Bible in this way is to read it for information, as some sort of slightly obscure instruction manual whose instructions are explained by the expert (the preacher) to the laity. Nancy Ammerman found something very similar in her earlier work with what she described as a "fundamentalist" church in the USA. There she noted that the pastor's sermon "explains what the Bible means and tells the people how the Bible says they should live" (1978, p. 121). Rogers would later reflect on one of the evangelical church's view of Bible reading as being "teaching, training, instructing, informing, and learning, but also rebuking and challenging," (2013b, p. 495).¹⁴⁴ Once again to handle the Bible in this way requires an efferent stance. Mike Jennings (2011, p. 192), quotes Wilson (2003) who argues that within Evangelical

¹⁴¹ Field (2014) does not use the term "biblical literacy" rather he refers to "Bible-centricism," to describe how central the Bible is to British society. Nonetheless the content of his paper addresses subjects which others, such as Pete Phillips, have labelled biblical literacy.

¹⁴² There will of course be no one answer to this question, for the population of Britain is diverse, nevertheless there may be some significant findings.

¹⁴³ Scott McKnight similarly suggests the tone of a Christian's relationship with the Bible shapes their reading of it. In his case, he further adds that behind this lies the type of relationship they have to the God read of in the Bible (2008, pp. 83-84).

¹⁴⁴ This echoes 2 Timothy 3:16 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness," (New International Version).

churches a propositional method of preaching exists. Where truths (in other words propositions) are extracted from the text and applied to the life of the congregation. Wilson notes that when engaging with a narrative or a poem, a text which is not propositional “it must be converted to propositional form in order for truth to be known and appropriated” (Wilson, 2003, p. 62). Once again to engage with the Bible in this way assumes an efferent stance.

Ann Christie’s research into how Anglican lay people in North Yorkshire view Jesus, something she labelled: “ordinary Christology” (2012; 2013), highlighted how the Bible is used with reference to Christ. She writes:

The data show that when people say ‘Jesus shows us how to live’ they are primarily casting Jesus in the role of moral exemplar: Jesus is the model for moral behaviour (because he was morally ‘totally perfect’ and ‘never did anything wrong’) whom they ‘should always aspire and strive to be like.’ (2013, p. 78).

Christie links this exemplarist view of Jesus to how her participants read the Bible. Such a reading is not uncommon, in 1957 Richard Hoggart summarized the Christian (or religious) aspect of working class culture in England in this way: “they will say, without a sense of contradiction, that science has taken the place of religion, but that we ought all to try to ‘live according to Christ’s teaching’” (1957, p. 116). In 1984 Robert Towler suggested there were five different types of religiousness in Britain and exemplarism was one of them, where a person “sees in Jesus, in his life and death, and in his teaching, an example for all to follow” (1984, p. 19). In light of some of these works, Jeff Astley describes exemplarism as “a particularly English form of Christianity” (1997, p. 101). The point I am making is that this exemplar way of viewing Jesus is a further illustration of how the Bible is read efferently within a British church setting.

If my participants’ tendency to read the biblical texts from an efferent standpoint reflects British church practice as well, as seen in the examples above, then there is surely a need to nurture aesthetical readings of the Bible within the church.¹⁴⁵ In *Encouraging Biblical*

¹⁴⁵ Mark Pike makes a similar call with reference to how the Bible is used in Secondary Schools (Pike, 2005; 2007). So too Esther Reed, Rob Freathy, Susannah Cornwall and Anna Davis note the “proof texting” approach commonly used in British Secondary Schools, where the Bible is it treated as a “source book for ethical

Literacy, Margaret Killingray argues against engaging with the Bible as one would an instruction manual. She writes: “A reading of John 1.1, Genesis 1.1 and Hebrews 1.1., should prepare us for a great deal more than the ‘handbook’ or ‘manual’ view of Scripture” (1997, p. 14). The promotion of narrative biblical criticism (Alter, 2011), reading the Bible as a story (Frei, 1974; McKnight, 2008), and imaging it as a drama (Wright, 1992, pp. 139-143; Bartholomew & Goheen, 2004), along with meditative Bible reading approaches like *Lectio Divina* (Macdonald, 2009; Webber, 2002, pp. 184-185), and the direct call for Bible engagement from an aesthetic stance (Pike, 2003; 2004) all affirm this.

With reference to the use of literature in schools and the predominant weight which is given to reading texts efferently, Rosenblatt suggests:

1. Do not generate an efferent stance when presenting texts as poems or stories or plays.
2. Do not use the texts being read aesthetically for the explicit teaching of reading skills.
3. Do not preface aesthetic reading with requests for information or analysis that require predominantly efferent reading.¹⁴⁶ (2005, pp. 102-103)

It may be worth those within the church reflecting on their use of the Bible and rebalancing a prevailing efferent reading stance by incorporating some of Rosenblatt’s suggestions and reading the Bible from an aesthetic standpoint as well.¹⁴⁷

Finally, as many of my participants demonstrated, a reader can dominate the reading of a text. For example, Sam, believed that the Bible’s central message could be summed up in the equation: do X or Y will happen. That equation was then what he found when reading the

principles” (2013, p. 301). They go on to argue that a narrative approach to the Christian faith and the Bible would result in the Bible not being viewed as “a quasi-philosophical collection of answers to difficult ethical dilemmas but as a narrative of how people have understood, and continue to understand, their relationship with God” (2013, p. 302). Such an approach would be much more conducive to both aesthetic and efferent readings of the Bible. My thanks to Susannah Cornwall who alerted me to this. See also Horrell and Davis (2014), Copley (1998), Copley, Lane, Savini and Walshe (2001) and Gearon, (2013).

¹⁴⁶ She also suggests: “4. Do not hurry the young reader away from the lived-through aesthetic experience by too quickly demanding summaries, paraphrases, character analyses, explanations of broad themes. 5. Do not hurry the young reader into substituting literacy terminology or definitions for the lived-through work” (2005, p. 103). These last two suggestions appear less relevant to contemporary British church practice.

¹⁴⁷ With David Smith, (2004) I am not advocating a purely aesthetical reading of the Bible, rather in light of the possibility that the Bible is normally read from an efferent stance, provision should be made for engaging with it from an aesthetical standpoint as well.

texts, thus confirming his original belief. This shows how a reader's relationship with the text can shape their reading and result in the affirmation of that prior relationship. However my participants were not alone in this act, as highlighted by Bonhoeffer's accusation to Christians of his day that "we no longer read the Bible seriously, we no longer read it against ourselves, but for ourselves" (1965, p. 185). The ease with which my participants (un)consciously read the Bible affirming their prior expectations or assumptions should act as a warning to those of us, myself included, who read the Bible regularly. I would suggest that it is just as easy for a regular Bible reader to read the Bible in this reaffirming way, as it was for my participants.

This need not be the case, on occasion it may be that the text leads us into an unexpected reading which does not conform to our prior expectations, as was the case for Stewart, Ethan and Phil. It is also possible for the reader to decide to "be fair," and to some degree withhold their expectations and assumptions, allowing the text to play a fuller role in the reading transaction. This latter option was one which required a conscious decision on Victor's part and is perhaps one way in which the Bible can be read lessening the chances of reading it "for ourselves." Miroslav Volf, makes a similar point when discussing how to read the Bible as scripture:

We can continue to engage the text without suppressing puzzlement or even negative judgement, while patiently waiting for the sense to emerge, either as a result of a new insight or of a personal transformation. In our encounter with the Bible, tarrying in persistent non-understanding is often the condition of the possibility of genuine disclosure, in which we hear more than just the echo of our own internal voice. (2010, p. 35)

Volf is arguing for the need of a reader's critical judgement when engaging with the Bible, one which assumes the text is neither corrupt nor passively accepts all that it claims.

Limitations and Further Research

There were of course various limitations with my case study, some of which I have noted earlier in this thesis, and there are three more worth considering now. First, my case study significantly focused on four aspects of a reader's relationship with a text, their experiences,

identity, attitudes and beliefs. I concentrated on these four areas because they emerged as main themes in my data and presenting them individually enabled me to explore each in greater depth. However, as I explained earlier, I am not suggesting that these are the only aspects which make up a reader's relationship with a text, for as Rosenblatt notes:

The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his [sic] inter-fusion with the peculiar contribution of the text. (1995, p. 30)

This highlights the need for further research into the relational nature of reading, encompassing aspects which I did not address. For example, I did not attempt to formally consider the role of the reader's personality (Francis, 2010), nor did I consider the participant's temperament on any particular day, or the influence they had upon each other as they spoke about the project outside my lunchtime visits. These are all part of a reader's relationship with a text which could be expected to influence their reading.

Furthermore, although the four aspects which I noted significantly informed the readings which took place they should not be thought of as being unconnected or mutually exclusive, rather two, three or all four of them will have played a significant role in any one participant's reading. Rosenblatt notes "the various strands of response are often simultaneous, often interwoven, and often interacting" (1994, p. 69). For instance Gary read the texts in a detached way because of his prior experiences of Christianity. However, his sense of a religious identity ("not at all religious") and beliefs about the Bible, (that it is a guidebook and was going to try to convert him) also informed his reading. These three different aspects were all part of Gary's relationship with the five biblical texts and shaped that reading; each reinforcing or working in tandem with the other, so his experiences informed his sense of identity and that identity reinforced the irrelevance with which he treated the texts, and so on. My decision to present the four aspects as distinct components does not do justice to their interlacing nature.

This suggests there is scope for further research, perhaps addressing the question: What is the British public's relationship with the Bible? Unlike other research into biblical literacy which

has subdivided it into different parts or in my own case compartmentalised the reader's relationship with the Bible. I would advocate an approach which is able to respond and appreciate the flowing, contradictory and interweaving nature of people's relationships with the Bible. Ethnography would be one such approach, as would undertaking a single case study, as Mike Jennings did (2011), for both would provide the degree of depth required to trace the various components of the reading transactions.

Another limitation of this study is that although all the participants volunteered to take part, they did so at my request, reading texts which I had chosen for them. This is one of the particularities of my case study and raises the question: How would these men have read the Bible if they had picked it up in a hotel room and read it in the privacy of that setting? Would their readings have been any different? Phil, a 48 year old "slightly religious" electrician suggested that reading the Bible in such a context (in other words out of his own volition) would have resulted in a "completely different" reading. He felt the research setting had encouraged him to "nit-pick," or highlight "the negatives."

Phil: It's only because we've been asked to provide answers that you nit-pick in a sense, if I was reading without this kind of influence, I'd have just sat, read it, and I'd read it and I'd put it back down.

David: OK, yep.

Phil: But I think that's just a natural reaction, people are picking out the negatives.

I would agree with Phil, in that I too think if my participants were to have read the five texts out of their own volition, the results would have been different. Perhaps the degree of counter-reading would have been less, and as Phil suggests the readers would not have nit-picked as much. My research materials doubtless influenced the reading which took place. However, I disagree that the research setting and tools inevitably resulted in the men reading sceptically. If, as Phil suggests, they strongly encouraged the participants to focus on the negative parts of the text then I would have expected all the readers to have done this, but they did not. The data shows that those who identified as "religious" were less likely to "nit-pick," whilst those who were "not religious" were more likely to "nit-pick." The participants'

religious identity correlated with the degree to which they read sceptically, suggesting it was a bigger factor.

The influence of my research methods upon the readings undertaken raises five different research avenues which may be worth subsequent exploration. First, much as the GOMA Bible annotation was undertaken in a setting where the public could choose to read and write on the Bible. So too, providing a series of similar sanctioned contexts where the public could read and respond to the Bible would be one way of removing the need to ask specific people to volunteer. Second, contrasting Bible readings in two different settings would be a further way of exploring the influence of the research materials and context upon the reading. For instance, if someone were to read a text out of a large black Bible in a Cathedral would they read it differently to one presented on a handheld tablet in a coffee shop? Furthermore simply asking “what did you make of that?” rather than inviting the reader to annotate and fill in a questionnaire would also add to the normalcy of the event rather than reinforcing its research nature. Third, if a reader’s relationship with the Bible shapes their reading of it, a comparison between how people read a text unaware that it was from the Bible and read it aware that it is a biblical text would shed light on how people view the Bible. Fourth, a similar comparison could be carried out with other sacred texts, where the same reader is asked to read something from the Qu’ran, the Bible, the Vedas (the sacred texts from the three largest religious groups in Britain) along with a text written by an atheist or agnostic. This again would reveal something of the reader’s relationship with these various groups. Fifth, all of these examples are snap shots of people’s relationships with the Bible, and this raises the need for a longitudinal component similar to Webster (2015), Jennings (2011) and Macdonald (2009). How would reading an entire book from the Bible over a series of weeks inform the reader’s relationship with the text? Would the relationship change, and if so in what way?

Finally, my case study assumed a reader-response and sociological approach to this subject. However, in doing so I was not claiming that my findings would fully explain the readings which took place; rather I was providing one particular perspective on them. This is a further limitation, for these readings could have been considered from a psychological, historical, philosophical or Christian theological perspective. For instance, as I noted in Chapter 1, in biblical studies the historical critical method is still widely used (Clines, 2009). However, because of the reader-response nature of this project I did not consider the implied authorial intent. Also, within Christian theology the Holy Spirit is understood to illuminate the reader

convincing them of the significance and implications of the biblical text (Klooster, 1984; Stein, 1994, pp. 91-72; Vanhoozer, 1998, pp. 407-431; Achtemeier, 1999, pp.122-126). Due to the approach I have adopted though I did not reflect on the role of the Holy Spirit but rather focussed on the participants own recounting of their readings.¹⁴⁸ Thus there is the need to re-examine Bible reading by those who are non-regular Bible readers but from different theoretical perspectives, complementing my own work.

Conclusion

This thesis began with a question: How would British people, who are not regular Bible readers, read the Bible? My attempt to answer it took me to a Chemical Industrial Plant and to 20 men who worked there. Kindly, they volunteered to read through five biblical texts, sharing their readings with me. Led by the data produced, one over-riding theme emerged, that these men's relationships with the five biblical texts shaped their reading of those texts. In other words, the associations evoked in these readers by these biblical texts, heavily informed the readings which followed. Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading provided the wider theoretical foundation upon which this could be presented for she had argued that a person brings all that they are to the reading of a text. In particular, my participants' experiences, identities, attitudes and beliefs were seen to shape the readings they undertook, and in doing so those same readerly elements were often reaffirmed in the process. This was not always the case however, for there were a few occasions when the texts stimulated the reader to an atypical or unforeseen reading. In this way I have been arguing for a relational view of reading.

¹⁴⁸ Village (2007) considers both of these aspects in his study of lay people's Bible reading.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet

Title of Project: A UK case study of men's interpretations of five biblical texts

You are being invited to take part in a research project to investigate the way British men interpret parts of the Bible. This study is being conducted by David Ford, a PhD student from the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Chester. Before you decide to accept the invitation to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please do not hesitate to ask David Ford if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Please take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

(01/03/12)

What is the purpose of the study?

This study explores the ways in which British men, especially those who do not regularly read the Bible, interpret the Bible. It hopes to identify what interpretation is reached and considers some of the factors which may have influenced their interpretation of some biblical passages.

This project and its findings will contribute to the study of the Bible and how it is read in non-academic and non-church settings.

Why have I been asked to take part in this study?

You have been asked to participate in this research because you are a British man who does not regularly read the Bible.

Do I have to take part?

The choice to take part in this study is yours. If you decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. You are under no obligation to reply to any questions you feel uncomfortable answering, and you can stop and leave at any time. Please feel free to discuss any questions or concerns you may have with David Ford before deciding to take part.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign the consent form. This will give your consent for David Ford to confirm a date, time and location for your first session.

Along with a biographical questionnaire, there are five manuals, an exit questionnaire and a one to one interview. In your first session you will be asked to complete the questionnaire and the first manual, this should take you around 30 minutes in total. The second, third and fourth sessions involve completing the appropriate manuals (one manual per session) and each should last around 20 minutes. The fifth session involves completing the final manual and a short exit questionnaire, all of which will probably take 25 minutes. The final, sixth session should last no longer than 30 minutes and takes the form of a one to one interview with David. If however the interview requires more time, then a second interview may be arranged.

The style and format of each manual is the same. It is divided into two parts. First, you will be asked to read through a passage from the Bible which is printed on the manual. You will then be asked to read it through again, but this time writing down your own thoughts, insights and feelings about the passage as you read it. Having completed this, the second part of the manual goes on to ask some specific questions related to the passage which you read.

The short exit questionnaire is mainly made up of a number of questions and tables which are repeated from the entrance questionnaire. This is then followed by the one to one interview which David will lead, and with your permission, may record using a digital voice recorder. This will give you the opportunity to discuss any particular passage or issue which has arisen over the six sessions. If during this interview it is obvious that more time is required to hear your thoughts and reflections then there may be the possibility of a second interview being arranged. David will transcribe the interview(s), providing you with a copy of the transcript and the opportunity to confirm that it is a true record of the interview(s).

It is anticipated that these 6 sessions may take place over a lunch time, and if so, David may provide a free lunch for the participants during sessions 1 to 5. Due to the one to one nature of session 6 no lunch will be provided then.

What are the possible disadvantages or risks of taking part?

I have not identified any risks or disadvantages to you taking part in the study.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

As a British man, you may welcome the opportunity to read and think about a passage from the Bible. By taking part, you will be contributing to our knowledge of how people read and understand the Bible, which is an under-researched area in Theology and Religious Studies.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential and will my answers be anonymised?

All information which is collected during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential so that only the researcher (David Ford) will have access to it.

If the information which you provide were to be included in any presentation, written report or publication, your personal details (for instance, your name, age etc.) will be anonymised.

What if something goes wrong?

If you wish to complain or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, please contact:

Professor David Clough
Acting Head of Department and Professor of Theology and Ethics
Department of Theology and Religious Studies
University of Chester
Parkgate Road
Chester
CH1 4BJ
d.clough@chester.ac.uk
01244 511044.

Professor Rob Warner
Dean of Humanities
University of Chester
Parkgate Road
Chester
CH1 4BJ
01244 511980

What will happen to the results of the research?

The results will be used as the basis for a PhD thesis and may also be utilised in secondary presentations or publications.

All the information which has been gathered as part of this study will be kept in secure storage for at least 10 years after the completion of the thesis, in compliance with best practice.

If it would interest you, when the PhD is complete, David Ford would be more than willing to email you a copy of the final PhD thesis. This option will be raised with you in the exit questionnaire.

Who is organising the research?

The research is conducted as part of a PhD in Theology within the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Chester. The study is organised with supervision from the department, by David Ford, a PhD student.

Who is funding the research?

This research is principally being funded by David Ford. In addition, two Charities (The Bible Society and an anonymous trust) have provided grants to pay the tuition fees.

Who may I contact for further information?

If you would like more information about the research before you decide whether or not you would be willing to take part, please contact:

David Ford
Postgraduate student
C/O Department of Theology and Religious Studies
University of Chester
Parkgate Road
Chester
CH1 4BJ
1124935@chester.ac.uk
07974860301

Thank you very much for your interest in this research.

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Title of Project: A UK case study of men's interpretations
of five biblical texts

Name of Researcher: David G. Ford

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet, dated 01/03/12, for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without my care or legal rights being affected.
3. I agree to take part in the above study.

☐☐☐

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

Appendix C: The Entrance Questionnaire – Part A

Thank you for your willingness to take part in this research.

This study seeks to give men the opportunity to read sections of the Bible and write down their reflections on them. It is important to reiterate that there is no “right” or “wrong” answer, your honest thoughts are what I am after. Further, everything that you write will be kept strictly confidential so that no-one else in your workplace or in any other setting will know what you have written.

Once again, thank you for interest in this study. I hope you enjoy it.

Preliminary Information

(1) Age:

(2) What is your job title?

(3) What qualifications have you gained?
(e.g. GCSEs, ‘A’ levels, Diplomas, Degrees)

(4) How would you describe is your national identity?
(Please tick all that apply)

- ☐ English
- ☐ Welsh
- ☐ Scottish
- ☐ Northern Irish
- ☐ British
- ☐ Other, please write in _____

(5) What is your ethnic group?

(Please choose **one** section from A to E, then tick **one** box to best describe your ethnic group or background)

A White

- ☐ English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British
- ☐ Irish
- ☐ Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- ☐ Any other White background, please write in _____

B Mixed/multiple ethnic groups

- ☐ White and Black Caribbean
- ☐ White and Black African
- ☐ White and Asian
- ☐ Any other Mixed/multiple ethnic background,
please write in _____

C Asian/Asian British

- ☐ Indian
- ☐ Pakistani
- ☐ Bangladeshi
- ☐ Chinese
- ☐ Any other Asian background, please write in _____

D Black/African/Caribbean/Black British

- ☐ African
- ☐ Caribbean
- ☐ Any other Black/African/Caribbean background,
please write in _____

E Other ethnic group

- ☐ Arab
- ☐ Any other ethnic group, please write in _____

Religion, Spirituality and You

(6) On the scale below, please circle one number to indicate how religious you consider yourself to be.

Very religious	Moderately religious	Slightly religious	Not at all religious	Do not know
1	2	3	4	5

(7) On the scale below, please circle one number to indicate how spiritual you consider yourself to be

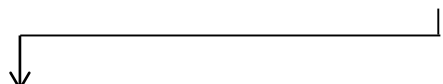
Very spiritual	Moderately spiritual	Slightly spiritual	Not at all spiritual	Do not know
1	2	3	4	5

(8) When was the last time you attended a religious service or took part in a religious/spiritual activity? E.g. went to church, took part in prayers, read a religious/spiritual book.

- (please tick one box)
- ☐ Sometime in the last week
 - ☐ Sometime in the last month
 - ☐ Sometime in the last year
 - ☐ Sometime in the last 2-4 years
 - ☐ Sometime in the last 5+ years
 - ☐ Never

(9) Do you, or have you ever regularly attended a religious service or participated in a religious/spiritual activity?

(please circle) YES NO —→ Go straight to question 17



(10) What religion was it? (If you have been involved in more than one religion please tell me about the most significant one)

(11) What was involved? (e.g. attending a service, participating in an event)

(12) When did you take part/attend?

(13) How long did you take part/attend for?

(14) Why did you attend?

(15) Have you ever regularly attended a religious service or participated in a religious/spiritual activity which you have not mentioned above?

(please circle) YES NO → Go straight to question 17

↓

(16) If so, please describe it

The Bible and You

(17) Do you presently own a Bible? (please circle) YES NO

(18) Is there a Bible in your home? (please circle) YES NO

(19) In your own words, what is the Bible?

(20) When was the last time you saw a Bible?

- (please tick one box)
- ☐ Sometime in the last week
 - ☐ Sometime in the last month
 - ☐ Sometime in the last year
 - ☐ Sometime in the last 2-4 years
 - ☐ Sometime in the last 5+ years
 - ☐ Never ☐

(21) When was the last time you read part of the Bible?

- (please tick one box)
- ☐ Sometime in the last week
 - ☐ Sometime in the last month
 - ☐ Sometime in the last year
 - ☐ Sometime in the last 2-4 years
 - ☐ Sometime in the last 5+ years
 - ☐ Never

(22) When was the last time you heard part of the Bible being read?

- (please tick one box)
- ☐ Sometime in the last week
 - ☐ Sometime in the last month
 - ☐ Sometime in the last year
 - ☐ Sometime in the last 2-4 years
 - ☐ Sometime in the last 5+ years
 - ☐ Never

(23) How many gospels are there in the Bible?

- (please tick one box)
- ☐ Two
 - ☐ Four
 - ☐ Twelve
 - ☐ Do not know

Thank you.

Your co-operation and honest input is much appreciated

Appendix D: The Entrance Questionnaire – Part B

This section is made up of three tables which contain statements about the Bible. As always, there is no “right” or “wrong” answer, your honest response is what counts.

(1) On the table below, please tick one box to indicate your personal response to each of the statements given.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree or agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Do not know	Please use this space to write any additional comments
<i>The Bible is full of myths and legends</i>							
<i>The problem is not the Bible, but the people who read it</i>							
<i>I'd like to read the Bible one day</i>							
<i>The Bible is used to say whatever people want it to say</i>							
<i>The Bible is no different to any other religious book</i>							
<i>The Bible is God's message to humanity</i>							
<i>The Bible is NOT relevant in today's world</i>							

(2) On the table below, please tick one box to indicate your personal response to each of the statements given.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree or agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Do not know	Please use this space to write any additional comments
<i>I'd be embarrassed to be seen carrying a Bible</i>							
<i>The Bible is true</i>							
<i>Other sacred texts are just as valid as the Bible</i>							
<i>The Bible contains errors</i>							
<i>The Bible is a comfort when people are in trouble</i>							
<i>The Bible is too religious for me</i>							
<i>The Bible is clear, it's humans who complicate it</i>							

(3) On the table below, please tick one box to indicate your personal response to each of the statements given.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree or agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Do not know	Please use this space to write any additional comments
<i>The Bible tells you what is right and wrong</i>							
<i>The Bible is one of the reasons people go to war</i>							
<i>I'm quite interested in the Bible</i>							
<i>The Bible is out of date for today's society</i>							
<i>The Bible is truer than all other religious books</i>							
<i>The Bible's teachings are morally offensive</i>							
<i>If we followed the Bible we'd be a better society</i>							
<i>I can't imagine me ever opening a Bible</i>							

Thank you, your willingness to take part in this research project is greatly appreciated

Appendix E: Manual 5 – Part A

Once again, thank you for agreeing to take part in this research project.

As I've mentioned before, all your responses will be kept strictly confidential and I'm here to answer any questions or queries. Don't forget, there is no such thing as a "right" or "wrong" answer, so please be as honest as you can.

This manual should take about 20 minutes to complete, (10 minutes for part A and a further 10 minutes for part B).

I hope you enjoy it.

The Task

On the next page (i.e. page 2) is a copy of a passage from the Bible. This passage is found towards the end of the Bible and appears to be a letter written by a 1st Century Christian leader to other Christians. It is usually given the title: *The Second Letter of John*.

1. Please read the passage through twice.
2. On the second reading, underline words, phrases or concepts which stand out for any reason, and use the blank space on either side of the passage to write down why they stood out.
3. Finally, use that same space to write down any other thoughts, feelings, ideas, images, memories, concerns or insights which you have about the passage. Don't forget, there are no "right" or "wrong" answers; your honest impressions are what count.
4. Once you have finished writing down your reflections, please complete part B.

This letter is from John, the elder. I am writing to the chosen lady and to her children, whom I love in the truth—as does everyone else who knows the truth—because the truth lives in us and will be with us forever. Grace, mercy, and peace, which come from God the Father and from Jesus Christ—the Son of the Father—will continue to be with us who live in truth and love. How happy I was to meet some of your children and find them living according to the truth, just as the Father commanded. I am writing to remind you, dear friends, that we should love one another. This is not a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning. Love means doing what God has commanded us, and he has commanded us to love one another, just as you heard from the beginning. I say this because many deceivers have gone out into the world. They deny that Jesus Christ came in a real body. Such a person is a deceiver and an antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked so hard to achieve. Be diligent so that you receive your full reward. Anyone who wanders away from this teaching has no relationship with God. But anyone who remains in the teaching of Christ has a relationship with both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to your meeting and does not teach the truth about Christ, don't invite that person into your home or give any kind of encouragement. Anyone who encourages such people becomes a partner in their evil work. I have much more to say to you, but I don't want to do it with paper and ink. For I hope to visit you soon and talk with you face to face. Then our joy will be complete. Greetings from the children of your sister, chosen by God.

Appendix F: Manual 5 – Part B

You and the Passage

- (1) What, if anything, “jumped out at you” as you read through the passage?

- (2) Was there anything you found confusing as you read the passage?

- (3) Please write a one line summary of the passage:

- (4) What, if anything do you agree with in the passage?

- (5) What, if anything do you disagree with in the passage?

- (6) What, if anything, was your “gut reaction” to this passage? (I.e. how did it make you feel?)

(7) Is there anything in the passage which you think is worth remembering?

(please circle)

YES

NO



(8) If so, what is it?

(10) If not, why not?

(9) Why is this worth remembering?



(11) Which of these is most important to you?

(please tick one box)

- ☐ The content of this passage
- ☐ What the author meant
- ☐ What it means to you

(12) In your own words describe the message of this passage.

(13) Please circle one number to indicate your response to the statement:

*“This passage is **NOT** relevant in today’s world”*

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree or agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Do not know
1	2	3	4	5	6

(14) In light of your answer to question 13, explain why you feel this way about the passage.

(15) Please use the space below to write down any other thoughts or comments which you have regarding the passage.

Thank you.

Your time, honesty and willingness are much appreciated.

Appendix G: The Short Descriptors Included in the Manuals.

Proverbs

On the next page (i.e. page 2) is a copy of a passage from the Bible. The Bible contains a number of different “books”, and this passage comes from the book of Proverbs which is found in the middle of the Bible. The book of Proverbs is a collection of short statements about life (i.e. proverbs).

The passage is known as Proverbs 10:1-11 and is entitled: The Proverbs of Solomon. Solomon was a Jewish king who lived around 3000 years ago.

2 Samuel 5:17-25

On the next page (i.e. page 2) is a copy of a passage from the Bible. It is found in the first half of the Bible, and more specifically it is from a part which describes the establishment of the nation of Israel and their kings around 3000 years ago.

This particular section is from 2 Samuel 5:17-25. It refers to David (the recently appointed king of Israel), the Philistines (a neighbouring nation who defeated and killed the previous king of Israel) and the valley of Rephaim (which was a couple of miles from David’s base).

Matthew 18:21-35

On the next page (i.e. page 2) is a copy of a passage from the Bible. It is in the second half of the Bible and comes from one of the books which focus on the life of Jesus.

The actual reference is Matthew 18:21-35, and describes a parable which Jesus told in response to a question he was asked. Parables are short stories through which various teachings are presented.

Psalm 88

On the next page (i.e. page 2) is a copy of a passage from the Bible. It is a song, and is part of a book of songs in the middle of the Bible. It is known as Psalm 88.

2 John

On the next page (i.e. page 2) is a copy of a passage from the Bible. This passage is found towards the end of the Bible and appears to be a letter written by a 1st Century Christian leader to other Christians. It is usually given the title: The Second Letter of John.

Appendix H: The Exit Questionnaire

This short questionnaire seeks to tie up some loose ends, providing an opportunity for you to think about the Bible and the five passages you have read.

As always, there is no “right” or “wrong” answer, please be as honest as you can.

The PhD Thesis

(1) It is considered best practice to offer all participants the opportunity to read the completed PhD thesis (sometime in 2014). If you would like a copy of the thesis emailed to you, please provide your email address in the space below (if you do not want a copy, then please leave the space blank).

The Bible and You

(2) In your own words, what is the Bible?

(5) On the table below, please tick one box to indicate your personal response to each of the statements given.

(3) Having read the five passage from the Bible, would you say:

(please tick as many boxes as you require)

- ☐ I have not been affected by reading these passages.
- ☐ I have been affected negatively by reading these passages.
- ☐ I have been affected positively by reading these passages.
- ☐ I have been affected, but neither positively nor negatively, by reading these passages.

(4) If you can, please explain your answer to Question 3.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree or agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Do not know	Please use this space to write any additional comments
<i>The Bible is full of myths and legends</i>							
<i>The problem is not the Bible, but the people who read it</i>							
<i>I'd like to read the Bible one day</i>							
<i>The Bible is used to say whatever people want it to say</i>							
<i>The Bible is no different to any other religious book</i>							
<i>The Bible is God's message to humanity</i>							
<i>The Bible is NOT relevant in today's world</i>							

(6) On the table below, please tick one box to indicate your personal response to each of the statements given.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree or agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Do not know	Please use this space to write any additional comments
<i>I'd be embarrassed to be seen carrying a Bible</i>							
<i>The Bible is true</i>							
<i>Other sacred texts are just as valid as the Bible</i>							
<i>The Bible contains errors</i>							
<i>The Bible is a comfort when people are in trouble</i>							
<i>The Bible is too religious for me</i>							
<i>The Bible is clear, it's humans who complicate it</i>							

(7) On the table below, please tick one box to indicate your personal response to each of the statements given.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree or agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Do not know	Please use this space to write any additional comments
<i>The Bible tells you what is right and wrong</i>							
<i>The Bible is one of the reasons people go to war</i>							
<i>I'm quite interested in the Bible</i>							
<i>The Bible is out of date for today's society</i>							
<i>The Bible is truer than all other religious books</i>							
<i>The Bible's teachings are morally offensive</i>							
<i>If we followed the Bible we'd be a better society</i>							
<i>I can't imagine me ever opening a Bible</i>							

Thank you, your willingness to take part in this research project is greatly appreciated.

Appendix I: The One-to-One Semi-Structured Interview Outline

INTRODUCTION

Re-iterate thanks for willingness to participate

- re-iterate option to withdraw
- re-iterate confidentiality and anonymity
- explain the structure of interview:
 - their response to the texts
 - housekeeping issues

(1) Can you tell me a wee bit about yourself? (life, family, hobbies, hopes, etc...)

(2) Go through the Entrance Questionnaire and confirm details.

BODY

(3) Any comments, in general, about the Bible passages that you read?

(3.1) Out of all the texts was there one which is particularly memorable (positively or negatively so)?

(3.2) Go through each text asking: "What did you make of this one?"

(4) Enquire about some of specific points of interest that they have made in their answers and annotations.

(5) When reading these texts (and the Bible in general), what is most important to you? Why the author wrote it, the content of the document itself, or what it means to you as you read it?

(5.1) Why do you think this is the case? (liaise with his own answers given in each session).

(5.2) Is this the same if you were reading a story book, bank statement or newspaper?

(6) Does the Bible have a purpose? And if so what is it?

(7) If appropriate, enquire about the negative annotation of the texts.

(7.1) If appropriate, enquire as to the possible reasons that most people are not willing to participate in this project?

(7.2) Did they have any of these reservations or concerns?

(7.3) Do you think it affected how you read these texts?

(8) How would you describe your own worldview or belief system, how you view life, the world, God, aliens that kind of thing?

(9) Have these Bible passages surprised you in any way?

(9.1) Have they been what you expected?

(10) Do you have any comments you would like to make?

CONCLUSION

Offer a copy of the transcript, and establish an appropriate email/postal address

Discuss if the participant would like to be identified by their first name or by a pseudonym, and if so what?

Thanks

Appendix J: Dave's Interview Transcript with Indicative Analysis

In order to further strengthen the claim that my analysis, interpretation and presentation of the data are fair, Dave's interview transcript is presented as evidence. What follows does not show the multi-layered coding which took place for that would result in a messy and potentially confusing transcript. Instead I have focused on one finding, the sceptical nature of Dave's readings. Throughout the transcript when Dave's discussion suggests a sceptical reading of a text, or a negative view of the Bible, I highlight the phrase in turquoise. When there is the indication of a more accepting reading, or positive view of the Bible, I highlight it in pink, and when his tone is unclear I use green.

Furthermore, so as to demonstrate that I have not taken quotes out of context, the four excerpts which I use are highlighted in yellow. In this way the wider conversation surrounding each quote can be appreciated. In the body of the thesis, the first quote is used when recounting Dave's rejection of Christianity, the second and third to show a sceptical reading and the fourth to part explain why he read sceptically.

This was the first interview I undertook, for this reason my performance and questioning was not as polished as it was by the twentieth. This interview occurred on the 23rd of November 2010 and was transcribed within seven days.

David: Em, no, em, I record this, and that (pointing to the Digital Voice Recorder) should pick it all up fine. And I'll then write it out word for word. Em, it reads really funny like, lots of "ems", "errs", from me anyway. And I email it to you. And it really just gives you a chance to read through it and if you think "hold on a minute I never said that" or "hold on a minute... something's gone pete-tong". Whatever, then you get back to me and say that it's not a true and accurate representation of our conversation. Em, now it should not happen, all I do should be, is take that (pointing to the Digital Voice Recorder) listen to it and type it out. And kinda' as a way of double checking that I'm not making you... I'm not planting words in your mouth, em, I email it to you. So hopefully sometime next year, eh next week, you'll get an email with it. Have a wee flick through it Dave, and then if anything turns out that "hold on a minute...

that was never said”, then you get back to me, em, or with any other questions. Is that alright? You are happy enough with that? And that is just kinda’ standard protocol that is meant to use with interviews

Dave: Most journalists don’t do that, (laughs)

David: No, (laughs)

Yeh, so a couple of things to say. As with the Manuals, em, you don’t need to answer any question that you don’t want to, and it’s all confidential and anonymous. So nobody will hear or read anything about our discussion, and if I ever use any of it in the thesis or a publication or that kind of thing, it is anonymised. So either you decide “don’t call me Dave, call me something else” or you say “actually I’m fine with you saying “Dave said it””, but they will never be able to place it at XXXX¹⁴⁹ they will never be able to place it here. So nobody should read it and link you with it.

Em... and the idea is, I’ve read your answers, and found them fascinating. So thank you for your honesty and your thoughts. Em, and I’ve got a, kinda’, half a dozen or so questions, em, and then there is a couple of wee housekeeping things to, just to tie up, if that’s OK.

Dave: Yep

David: Em, thanks for signing up to this Dave. It’s worth reiterating, em, the hardest part of this project has been getting guys to say “yes”, mainly because they aren’t interested. And, yeh, and so folks who are willing to say, “we are not interested but we’ll do it for you anyway”, just makes all the difference, and someone like you saying “yes”, means that actually the rest of the guys say “yes” as well, because they trust you, so. Yes and you’ve kinda’ gone above and beyond the call of duty, providing this kinda’ setting and this kinda’ thing, chasing other things up for me, so thanks for that Dave.

¹⁴⁹ Throughout the interview I use the proper name of the Chemical company along with place, school and church names. In order to maintain an appropriate level of anonymity I have blanked these out, Dave’s name however has remained unchanged as he requested.

Dave: No problem.

David: I appreciate that.

So tell me a wee bit about yourself, kinda' the life of Dave in two minutes.

Dave: Em, what you mean like, where I was brought up, and.

David: Aye just.

Dave: I was brought up in Sale, I was one of four kids, I was the second eldest. I had an older sister who, she went to, when she, I think it was my Dad's proudest moment when she passed for Grammar School. She was a high flyer at Grammar School and she ended up going to Oxford and then dropping out of Oxford after a year.

David: OK.

Dave: At the very point where I was meant to be doing my 'A' levels, so that was sort of, pulled the plug on everybody's education. I went to XXXX Boy's Grammar and I was going to go on and do my 'A' levels and go to University, but at that point my Dad said "no, I'm not wasting any more money on kids going to University and education." So, I went, at the time there was not a lot of apprenticeships around, so I went working as a Lumber Jack. Did that for a couple of years and then my friend started working for a welding company, so I thought "I'll give that a go". So, that's how it happened really, just sort of dropped into it, I never deliberately set out to be a welder. I was crap at metal work at school.

David: (Laughs)

Dave: Seriously I was, I was never any good with my hands it was just a case of.

David: And enjoy it now, or?

Dave: Em, it's just become part of my life, that's all. It's not specifically something I enjoy doing. I enjoy work, because I enjoy the, when you've spent a lot of time working away, you end up, your social life is your work life. You know, for years and years and years I didn't have holidays. I just worked the year and at the end of the year they used to say, "oh by the way, there's four weeks holiday that you've never had, again!" It's the same that happens now, even though my wife forces me to have holidays. They are always ones that I don't really want to go on. Last couple of years I've started doing some of my own holidaying.

David: OK, and married?

Dave: Married, two kids, em, well they are not kids now.

David: What ages?

Dave: Daughters 24 and my son's 16, in another week. He's doing really well at school. He's going to be good. He wants to be a Chemical Engineer. How that can be the dream of a 15 year old I don't know really.

David: (Laughs)

Dave: Em, hobbies wise, I've done just about everything. I've gone in a circle actually. When I was 16, 17 years old, I got obsessed with climbing and about 4 years ago I got back into climbing, that was after going around, motor cross, rally driving, running, walking, skiing, every, just everything. I do it for a year, two years then get bored and move on. That's most males I think.

David: Aye fair dos. Can I double check a couple of things with you. Em, do you remember the name of the church that you went to as a kid?

Dave: There was, there was... as a very small child, it was a Pentecostal Church in XXXX called XXXX or something like that. And then my parents moved to a church on, on XXXX Road, XXXX Baptist Church. And then that only lasted a while because me Dad had fallen out with the Pastor. And then the, we went to a Church called, it was

an independent Methodist church, it was all happy clappy. It was quite fun really. But that, I wasn't really so much involved in that because I was getting to 14, 15 and not really bothering. I think I'd found something else in my life.

David: Em, so, I wondered if you could describe for me, or unpack for me the process your, how you seem to approach the Bible your thoughts on the Bible now is probably quite different to that of the Churches that you went to when you were eight, nine, ten. Em, What's that journey, from that eight, nine, ten year old to the 44 year old now? How's your, your kind of, how's your mind?

Dave: What's changed my opinion on religion, and people?

David: Yeh.

Dave: Me opinion on God has never actually changed and I've never really had an opinion on God, I've never been convinced that there was a God, but I quite liked the people. I know it sounds wrong this, I quite liked the people because they were more gentle, and they were nicer people. Around 15, 16, I became aware of a hell of a lot of hypocrisy, because as I was turning into an adult I was seeing these people for what they really were. One face was what they were on a Sunday and the other face was what I could see they were behind closed doors and away from the Church. And I didn't like, without, without exception it was everybody that was involved in that religion. Then as I've grown up, I've, I don't know watching the news about what happens in Israel and Palestine, and it just, everything is always religion has caused the problem. Whichever way you look, when you look back in history and when you look now, it's alright saying money, but religion is just an instrument of money. The churches control land, they control vast amounts of money, religion is just an excuse for an, a controlling method for the money people to control the masses. That's all it is, that's all it's ever been.

You know whose, if you take it back now, I mean I can't, I'm no historical expert, but I remember being in France five or six years ago, and really being interested in what the French had to say about this church and about, they had mad connections with Mary Magdalene. About, em, I read a book that they gave me in French, it took me

ages and ages to get a copy in English but I read it and it was all about John taking over. Mary Magdalene wasn't, apparently females weren't allowed to earn money in biblical days and the reason, she was, she was one of the disciples and she financed Jesus. She was the start of Christianity, this is according to this church in France, the reason John portrayed her as an ex-prostitute and downcast and several books that are, that were part of the Bible that aren't in the Bible now, the whatever we call King James was it, when he had a clean-up and sorted out the bits he wanted. Any mention of Mary Magdalene was left out and bits that, and it was John was the principle person, he saw religion as, as an area to control people. He was anti-Semitic basically, he wanted to break away from the Jews. That was all that I saw, I've seen it now. It is historical, a lot of it is based on truth but it's half-truths because we've not got the whole book.

David: No, that's helpful Dave thank you. Em.

Dave: Is it John's that's in John Ryland's Library in Manchester? Is it part of John? There is a section of actual manuscript in there. Right opposite Blacks, that's the only reason I know

David: (laughs) Another tangential question that really came to me reading through some of your thoughts, were that some people seem to go to church as kids for whatever reason, Grannie takes them to Sunday School, the go to BB, Boy's Brigade or something like that. 12, 13 time to move on, em, football, girls, alcohol whatever it is. And some folks seem to remain then, in later life sympathetic to the church and other folks seem to kinda' have a "once bitten twice shy"

Dave: Yeh like a bitter.

David: Yeh, what's the difference? Why do you think some folks remain sympathetic and other folks, em.

Dave: Personally I would be bitter, I would be a lot more bitter, and I know it sounds silly this but I've got people that I've known since I was 10 years old on my Facebook, I've got there's one lad called Dennie that is about 3, 4 years older than me. He, he

was best friends, he was almost like a son to the pastor of the church on Glebelands Road. Until this pastor found out that Dennie was gay, now Dennie is still a practicing Christian but he has nothing to do with that church and nothing to do with the people from the church. I also know another family, unfortunately the daughter isn't on my Facebook, but the son is. He's a highflyer in Manchester, I mean he's worth a good few pound, he's a very, very nice person. Christian person, who doesn't ram it down anyone's throat. He's on Facebook having a laugh with everyone. He doesn't, he'll object if somebody uses bad language or crudities on his comment, but the rest of the time he'll just blank it and ignore it. That has helped me, not be bitter about it, because there are, it doesn't do you any harm, God doesn't harm anyone, a belief in Jesus doesn't harm anyone, it's religion, every time it's religion. Jesus himself taught that religion was bad, so why now do we adopt you know, I don't quite get it. It goes against his teachings.

David: Thank you, em, no that was really helpful Dave, thank you.

Moving onto the five passages themselves, any comments in general about them? Em.

Dave: I wish that I, I don't know whether I even said I would read the Bible, but I tell you what I would read, some of the Old Testament, but then again I read Brothers Grim. And it's, to me it's the same sort of reading. They are like stories to make a, you know, a moral or a principle to bring it home. And there is a certain amount of gore and horror and that was why it was written. That was why, it's got to be. There's rules now that they still don't quite understand why Jews have these rules, but then when you look now there are reasons for it, and how they knew them rules, to inflict them rules on their people then, you don't quite know but. They are still relevant today. I would read it but as a story, not as a.

David: Yep, no, was there one passage or two passages that stood out positively or negatively out of the five?

Dave: Yeh, the last one, the last one negatively, it riles me.

David: Aye OK, you'd described, you said you "felt angry", was one of your comments about it.

Dave: Because it's like, it's like starting a religion based on declaring war on another religion. And I don't get it. When he left, this person that they all followed and thought was the reason they were on the planet and they were so grateful he died for them and everything else, why the second once he's left did they start building something that goes against what he was teaching? You know, forgiveness and everything else, he's immediately talking about, like, blanking, ignoring and exiling people for not having the same belief as him.

David: Because they don't agree with.

Dave: And I don't get that, I never have done.

David: No that's helpful thank you Dave, em, let me just grab (reach for a rucksack with the participants 5 manuals).

Dave: You look at people now in this country, that's why they are like they are with the Muslims, I don't see why, why, or rather the Muslims are with us. Because we've not got the same belief as them, I'm not on about everyone, I'm on about extremists obviously, but I don't understand why anyone has got the right to tell someone else what to believe.

David: Yep, em so these are the five passages, em, and this is what I do with everybody. What did you make of that one? That was the proverbs one? (Pass the Proverbs passage from Dave's manual to Dave.)

Dave: They are good, but they are like things you get on a calendar, one a day, aren't they?

David: Chinese fortune cookies, kinda' thing?

Dave: Yeh, yeh, there, there's some good ones. I must admit. I like that first one. Because that's just like, I actually wrote that on Stewarts Facebook (laughs)

David: (Laughs) OK, this is the Old Testament story, what did you make of that one?
(Passing Dave his copy of 2 Samuel)

Dave: It's just violence again in the name of God isn't it? It's, you could read, if you read, you see, I don't know. Have you got children?

David: Aye, two.

Dave: Do you, have they read the Old Testament? If it was anything but the Bible, you wouldn't let them read it. I know that sounds funny, get a Brothers Grim book and read it to yourself first and just way up whether you'd let your children read it. When it's on about wolves biting babies heads off and, and in a way the Bible's the same. It's not, it's not real and it's lost its shock value now because of television and modern. At one point if you'd have read that, I don't know, not so much to me, but probably 100 years ago, if you'd have read that to a child six, seven years old you'd actually put the bejesus up them. You'd scare the hell out of them, and it would be a God of impending doom, "if you don't do as you are told and everything else." It would you know, it's a fantasy world isn't it.

David: Yeh, so here's, this is the Parable. What did you make of that one (handing Dave the Parable manual)?

Dave: ... Again it's just the threat of God, isn't it! You know all of a sudden, we're meant to, we're meant to, we're meant to forget about a forgiving and loving, loving father and God and it's not. He's actually just, we're under threat, you know.

David: Yeh, this was the Psalm (passing Dave the Psalm manual).

Dave: Quite nice the psalms aren't they (laughs).

David: What did you make of that one?

Dave: It's just like old poetry, and again a cruel unforgiving God.

David: Mm and you've mentioned that (indicating the fifth manual) one as the one that stood out.

Dave: I don't, a religion such as Christianity is meant to be about peace and everything else, but when you read it, especially later on in life, when it's got no relevance and you're not affected by it. It is, it is rebel rousing and violent orientated, threatening. You believe what we believe or we'll come and cut your heads off. Basically, that is the message of the Old Testament and the New Testament seem to give out to me. There's a lot of morals mixed in there and rules and, that I'm sure if we followed all the good bits and left all the bad bits, but they needed the bad bits in didn't they? That was how they controlled people. You know it was all about... It's all about control and people, I'm sure it is. That's probably half the problem with the world now is, we don't have them threats and we don't have the barriers of religion, whereas we were brought up. I don't know whether you, were you brought up in a Christian home?

David: (Indicated yes, with a nod of the head).

Dave: You'd, you have sets of rules instilled in you. I've got Catholic friends who are all very, very strong Catholics and all they, they have a set of rules, but somehow they are different from a Christian's rules. I'm not saying Catholics aren't Christians. But because their parents were strong Roman Catholic, not Roman Catholic, but Catholic, they seem to have a different set of rules. They seem to, it's like they can, they can do wrong but as long as they go, they abide certain, fulfil certain categories. As long as they go to church Sunday morning, as long as they go to confessional once a month, then they are alright near enough doing anything in between. They don't seem pricked by a conscience quite as much as if you were brought up in a Christian environment rather than a, it's weird isn't it.

David: Em, thank you for that, here's a slightly random one. Em, when reading a passage from the Bible, we've talked about 5, em. What is most important to you? Why the original author wrote it, the content of it itself, or what it means to you? When it comes to reading a passage from the Bible, is it, the thing that is most important, is it either why the author wrote it, the content itself.

Dave: Yeh, why they author wrote it.

David: Why do you think that is?

Dave: Because I'd find that more interesting just trying to work out what they were trying to make you do, or what message they were trying to get across. Because it's not, always entirely relevant now. You've got to dig a little bit deeper to find out what the underlying message would be and why they were doing it. I think

David: Thanks helpful. Here's, kinda, 3 direct questions Dave. It's stuff that you've mentioned in the past, so forgive the fact that it's slightly repetitive?

Does the Bible have a purpose?

Dave: Yeh, without a doubt.

David: And what is the purpose?

Dave: I think the original purpose was just to give a historical account of events, but since then religion and people have used it to control mass, masses of people.

David: OK, that's helpful.

Em, do you believe in God?

Dave: I'm not sure.

David: OK.

Dave: I wouldn't say I'm an atheist but I'm not, or agnostic, what so you call it?

David: Agnostic?

Dave: Agnostic, yeh.

David: Em, and what do you think about the idea of religion or organised religion?

Dave: I think if I was going to be a part of an organised religion it would be Hinduism, to be honest they are the only ones who don't seem to object to other religions.

David: OK, yup, thank you.

Em, OK, right you aren't the only person to have done this, em, but one of things that was interesting that the first question in the manual is, "What jumped out at you?", about the text and all of your comments were negative. Why do you think that is?

Dave: Probably because I've, probably because I, of what I've, the people I've met, my upbringing and the journey of my life. Religion is attached to a lot of negativity, because of the people, not because of the Bible or. It makes, it just makes you look on the bad side of things really, I mean I could read it and pick out deliberately nice pieces but generally speaking, everybody I've ever known has used the Bible as an instrument to get their message across. And it's not the Bible's message, it is an interpretation of the Bible to get their message, and that's what I don't like.

David: No that's a helpful comment, thank you.

Em... eh, so this was the psalm passage (indicating the Psalm's manual). And there were some, em, and the, one of the interesting things was the way you answered these questions here (showing Dave manual 4, Q3-6), so a one line summary of the passage: If you cross God he'll make your life a misery. What if anything do you agree with the passage: My life is full of misery. Em, what is your gut reaction? Scared of crossing God's will. All those answers, appear to affirm a belief that there is a God. Em, and then reading something like your answer to 14 (showing the participant Q14), actually we've got science to explain these things we don't need fairy tale stories to evoke fear from an imaginary God. Seems to affirm a belief in a world where God doesn't exist.

Dave: No it doesn't, the first bit doesn't affirm a belief in God, it affirms a fear of being wrong about there not being a God, if you understand what I mean.

David: OK, that's a really helpful comment Dave, OK, OK

Dave: Everybody, nobodies infallible, for so many people to believe in something there must be something there. But if you, you can't make yourself believe something, so.

David: No that's interesting, that clarifies it really well, thank you, no that was really helpful.

Em, now you maybe didn't realise this, and it's probably a flaw in the material, but in a number of manuals, em, you skipped pages.

Dave: Did I?

David: Yeh, for instance in this one this page wasn't done (showing Dave Manual 2), I think in three of them, em, em... (showing Manuals 2, 3, 4). I think my question was principally, and in this one I think you did the first page but then the second and third pages weren't done (indicating Manual 3). My question I think is, was that just like a: I've done it and didn't realise. Or was it: I can't be bother with this today?

Dave: No it wasn't a consciously not filling them in.

David: OK, no that's helpful, again just trying to kind of assess. Em... em, I think our time has probably gone now. Em, any final comments? Thoughts or insights?

Dave: Em, would you mind if I asked you what religion you are attached to?

David: Yeh, so I think I'm a Christian, em and probably an uncomfortable Christian or a doubting Christian. Em, I see a lot of things in the Church, in the Christian faith or by people who happily wear the label that I'm uncomfortable with, that I wouldn't want to associate myself with. And em, and I have my own doubts, questions about God, about em, truth and that kinda' thing. And eh, yeh and for me to be honest means that I need to acknowledge those doubts rather than pretend they don't exist, so.

Dave: Yeh, we are instructed to follow it blindly.

David: Aye, em, and I guess, so I guess for me, I'm, I guess, it's kind of a, it's kind of a twee saying. I guess I'm trying to work things out in a kind of tentative, doubting kinda' way. Hopefully with a head maybe a bit like yourself Dave, that you look back on things and you think that was controlling or that was whatever. And maybe a head that is just a wee bit more wise now than I was when I was 12 or 13. Em, so, and not being able to follow something blind. Em, I need something of, I'm too pragmatic for that, if I can't on the whole, which is maybe why I'm a doubting Christian. If I can't you know rest my weight on it, knowing that I can rest my weight on it, then I'm not sure that I'm going to sit on it. Yeh so I'm maybe an uncomfortable Christian, or a doubting Christian or something.

Dave: Maybe if there were some, maybe if there were more Christians that were, a lot of the problems with religion would be irradiated because I think our, fear and blind faith that allows the masses to follow a religion even when it goes wrong. That's what I think anyway. Like Catholicism and, you know. They've gone so far off the mark, that they shouldn't even deserve the title of being classed as Christians, I think. You know they butchered and bastardised the book and teachings so far for their own benefit, that they've taken the whole essence of it away. Anyway that's me ranting.

David: Em, so, I'll em, I'll transcribe this and in the middle of the week you'll get an email from me with it. Em, the final is, em (someone else walks into the room but leaves). When it comes to writing up the project, em, I can either say "Dave" and leave it as your first name, and that is what would go into the thesis as one of my participants, participant number 201. Or em, you can choose a pseudonym, so you could say "don't call me Dave call me Mike or Mark" or that kind of thing.

Dave: No, not bothered. Nope

David: Happy with "Dave"?

Dave: Yup.

David: Dave it is then.

Sir, it's been a pleasure Dave,

Dave: Good luck with it.

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